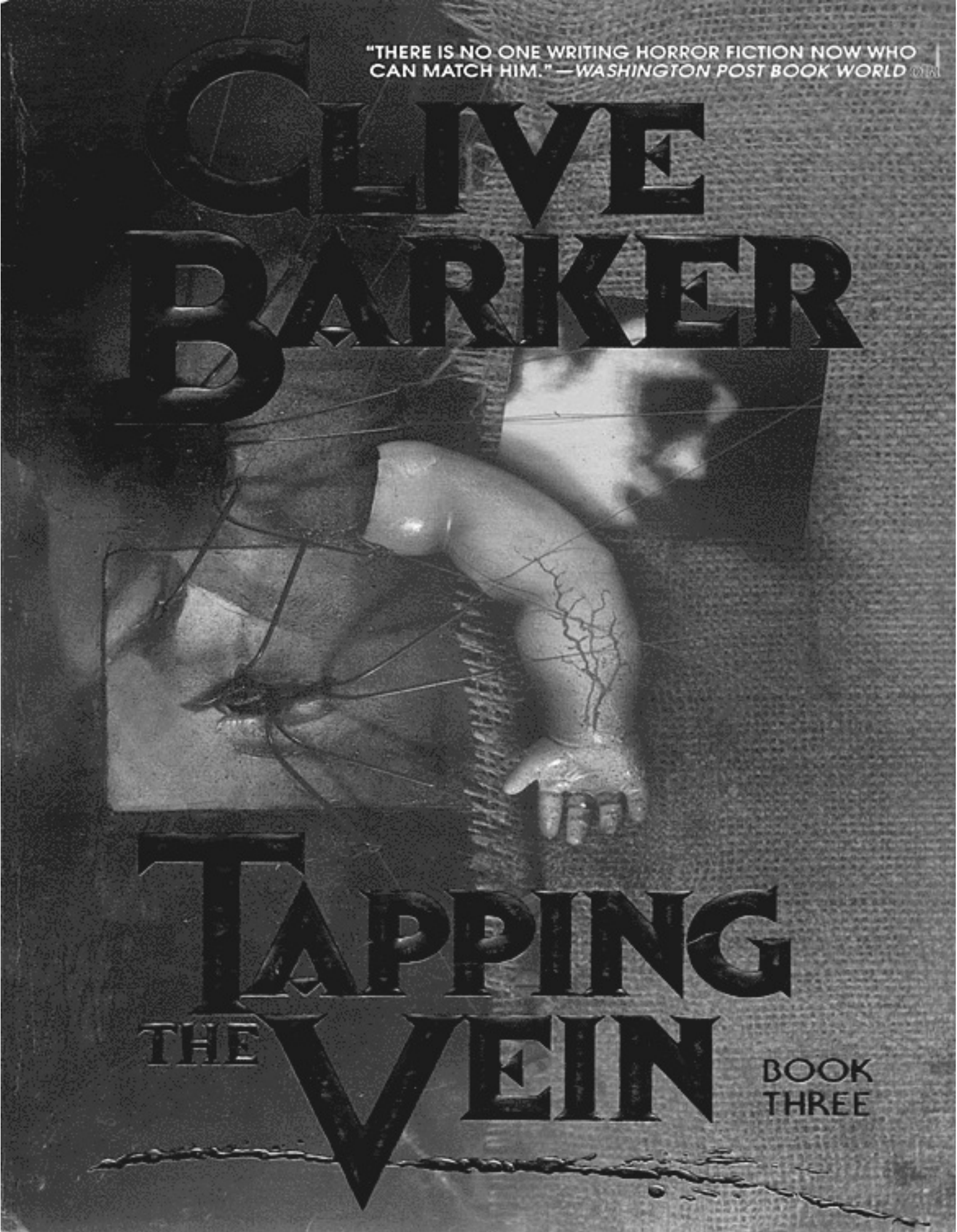
VISIT…

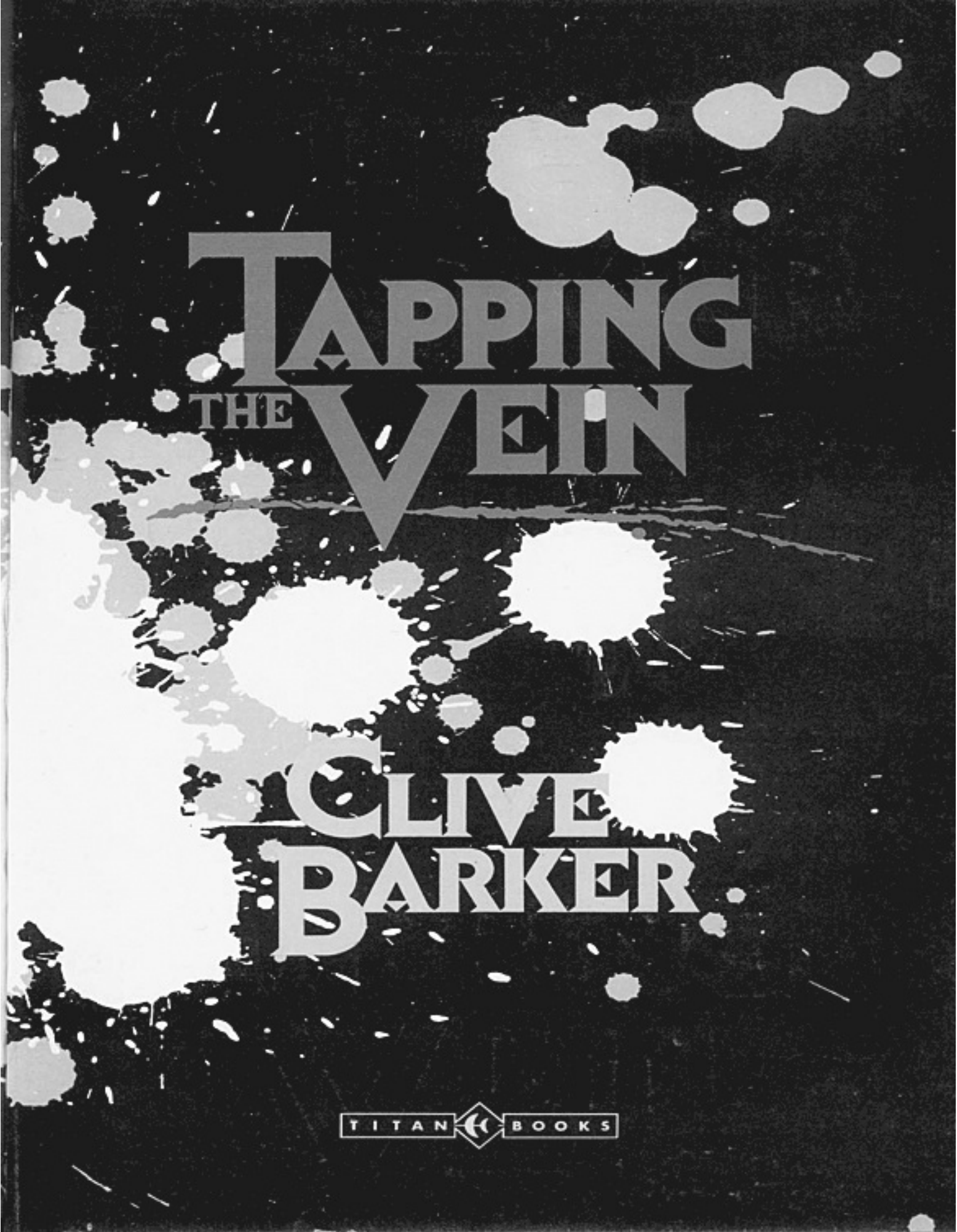
"THERE IS NO ONE WRITING HORROR FICTION NOW WHO CAN MATCH HIM."—*WASHINGTON POST BOOK WORLD*

CLIVE BARKER



THE TAPPING VEIN

BOOK THREE


TAPPING
THE VEIN
CLIVE
BARKER
TITAN BOOKS

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The Midnight Meat Train

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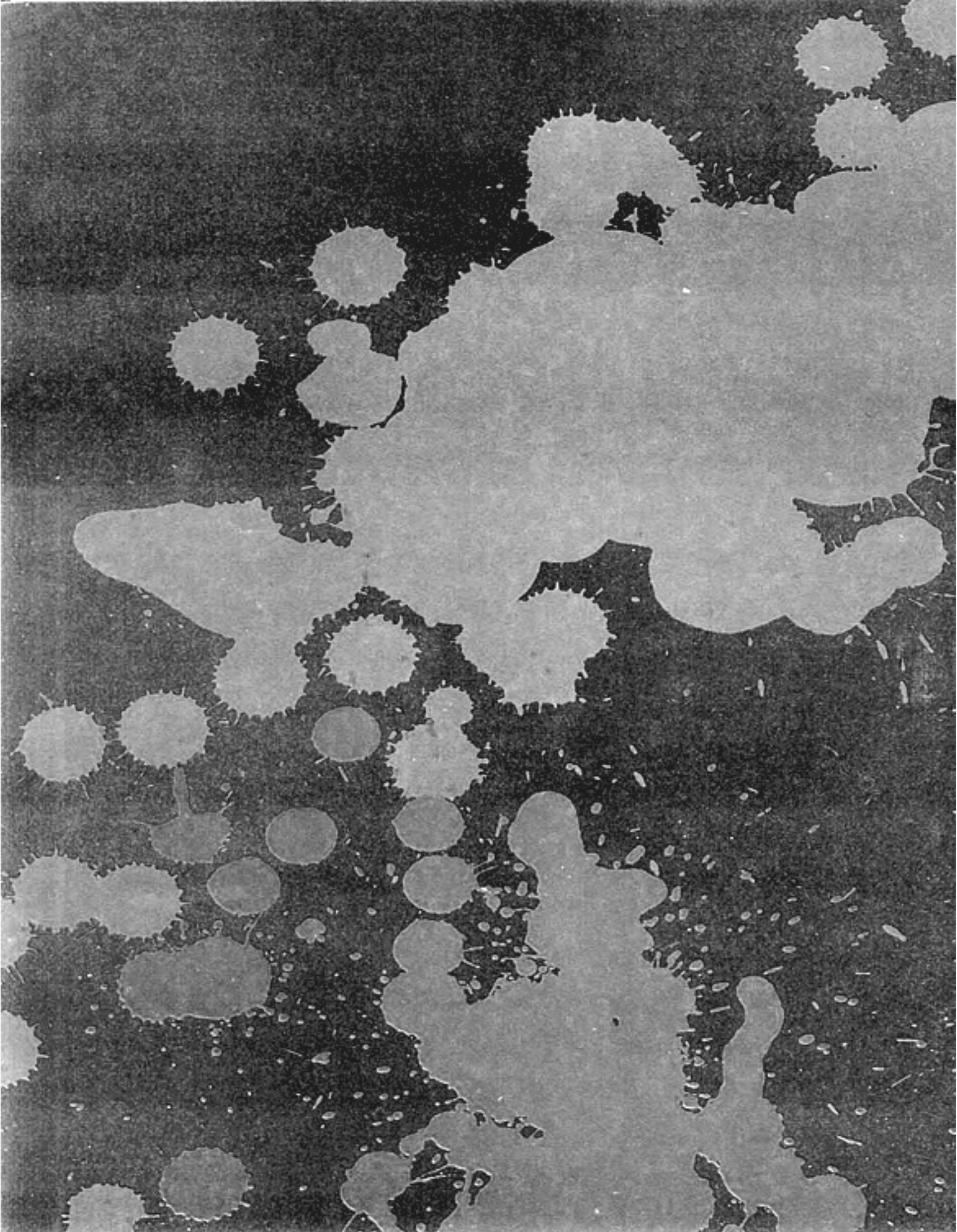


The MIDNIGHT MEAT TRAIN

ILLUSTRATED BY DENYS COWAN & MICHAEL DAVIS

LEON KAUFMAN WAS NO LONGER NEW TO THE CITY. THE PALACE OF DELIGHTS, HE'D ALWAYS CALLED IT, IN THE DAYS OF HIS INNOCENCE.

BUT THAT WAS WHEN HE'D LIVED IN ATLANTA, AND NEW YORK WAS STILL A KIND OF PROMISED LAND, WHERE ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING WAS POSSIBLE.

NOW KAUFMAN HAD LIVED THREE-AND-A-HALF MONTHS IN HIS DREAM-CITY, AND THE PALACE OF DELIGHTS SEEMED LESS THAN DELIGHTFUL.

SO SHORT A TIME TO LOSE SO MANY TREASURED ILLUSIONS. AFTER LIVING WITH HIS OBJECT OF ADORATION, SPENDING HIS DAYS AND NIGHTS IN HER PRESENCE, SHE HAD LOST HER AURA OF PERFECTION.

NEW YORK WAS JUST A CITY.

HE HAD SEEN HER WAKE IN THE MORNING LIKE A SLUT, AND PICK MURDERED MEN FROM BETWEEN HER TEETH, AND SUICIDES FROM THE TANGLES OF HER HAIR.

The Palace

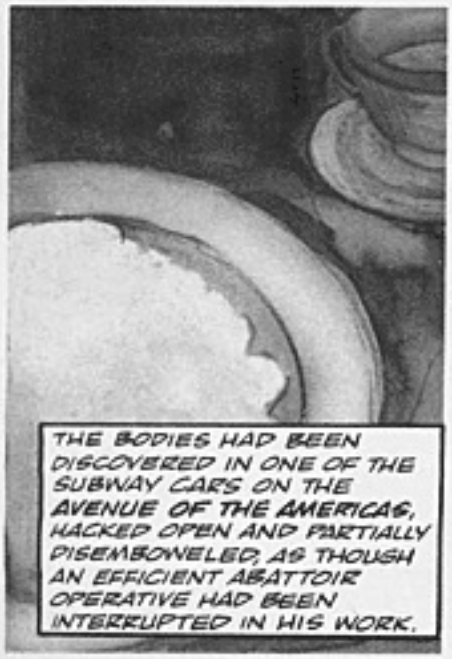
HE HAD SEEN HER LATE AT NIGHT, HER DIRTY BACK STREETS SHAMELESSLY COURTING DEPRAVITY.

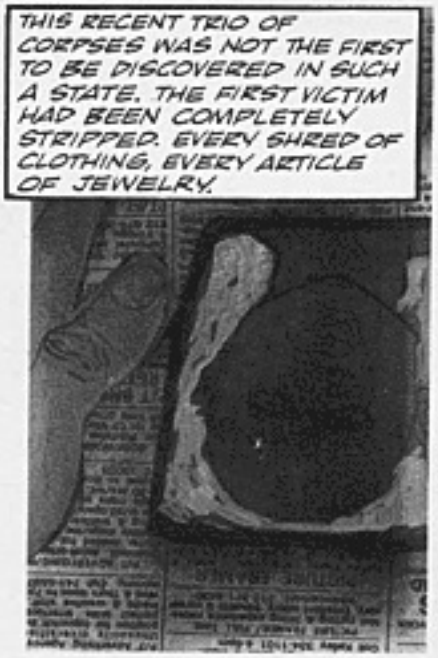
IT WAS NO PALACE OF DELIGHTS.

SUBWAY SLAUGHTER

IT BRED DEATH, NOT PLEASURE.

"SUBWAY SLAUGHTER" WAS THE CATCH-PHRASE OF THE MONTH. ONLY THE PREVIOUS WEEK ANOTHER THREE KILLINGS HAD BEEN REPORTED.


THE BODIES HAD BEEN DISCOVERED IN ONE OF THE SUBWAY CARS ON THE AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS, HACKED OPEN AND PARTIALLY DISEMBOWELED, AS THOUGH AN EFFICIENT ABATTOIR OPERATIVE HAD BEEN INTERRUPTED IN HIS WORK.


THIS RECENT TRIO OF CORPSES WAS NOT THE FIRST TO BE DISCOVERED IN SUCH A STATE. THE FIRST VICTIM HAD BEEN COMPLETELY STRIPPED. EVERY SHRED OF CLOTHING, EVERY ARTICLE OF JEWELRY.

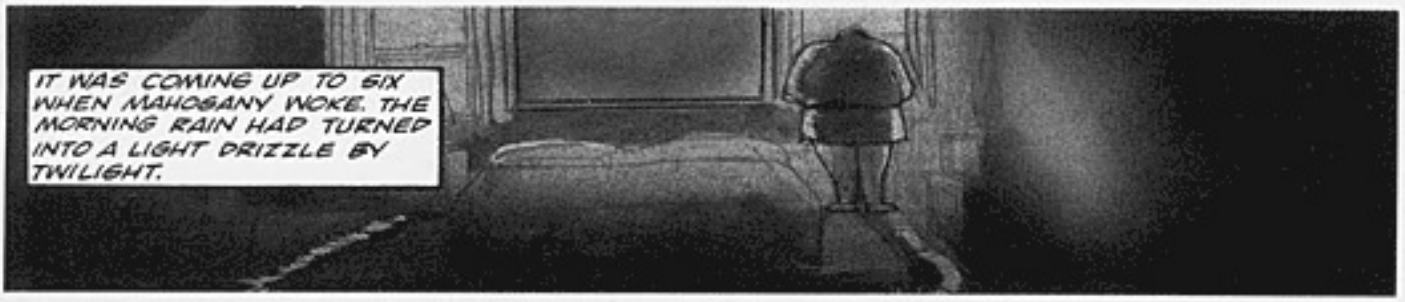
MORE BIZARRE THAN THE STRIPPING WAS THE NEAT AND SYSTEMATIC WAY IN WHICH THE CLOTHES HAD BEEN FOLDED AND PLACED IN INDIVIDUAL PLASTIC BAGS ON THE SEAT BESIDE THE CORPSE.

THEN THE BODY HAD BEEN METICULOUSLY SHAVED: EVERY HAIR HAD BEEN REMOVED: FROM THE HEAD; FROM THE GROIN, FROM BENEATH THE ARMS; ALL CUT AND SCORCHED BACK TO THE FLESH.
EVEN THE EYEBROWS AND EYELASHES HAD BEEN PLUCKED OUT.

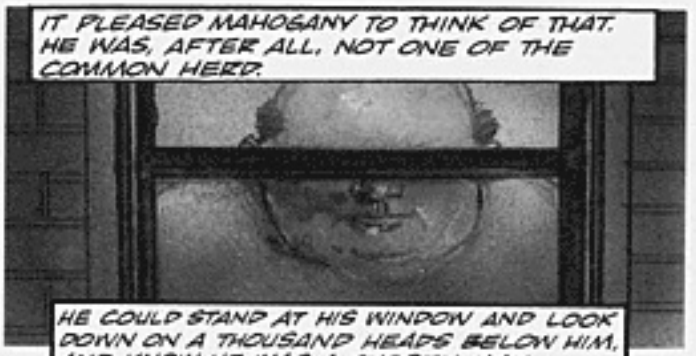
FINALLY, THIS ALL TOO NAKED SLAB HAD BEEN HUNG BY THE FEET FROM ONE OF THE HOLDING HANDLES SET IN THE ROOF OF THE CAR, AND A BLACK PLASTIC BUCKET, LINED WITH A BLACK PLASTIC BAG, HAD BEEN PLACED BENEATH THE CORPSE TO CATCH THE STEADY FALL OF BLOOD FROM ITS WOUNDS.

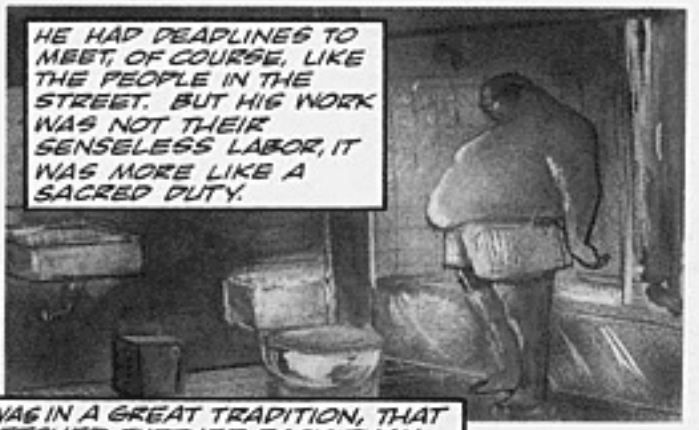
THERE HAD BEEN NO RAPE, NOR ANY SIGN OF TORTURE. THE WOMAN HAD BEEN SWIFTLY AND EFFICIENTLY DISPATCHED AS THOUGH SHE WAS A PIECE OF MEAT. AND THE BUTCHER WAS STILL LOOSE.
SHIT!

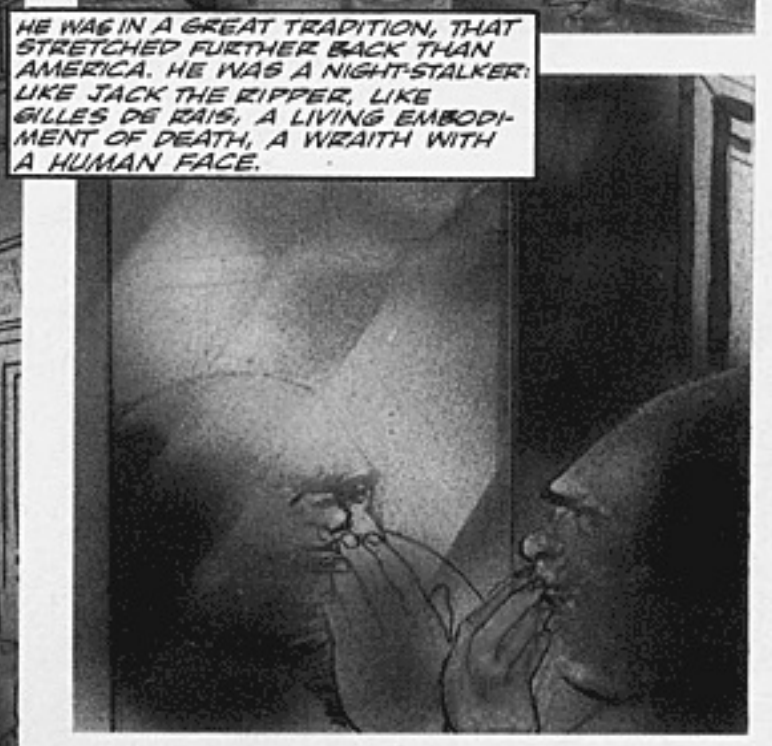
SHIT!
NO HARM DONE.
THE CITY FATHERS, IN THEIR WISDOM, DECLARED A COMPLETE CLOSEDOWN ON PRESS REPORTS OF THE SLAUGHTER.
IT WAS SAID THAT THE MAN WHO HAD FOUND THE BODY WAS IN PROTECTIVE CUSTODY IN NEW JERSEY, OUT OF SIGHT OF INQUIRING JOURNALISTS.
BUT THE COVER-UP HAD FAILED.
KAUFMAN FOUND HIMSELF WONDERING IF THIS OAF, WITH HIS FLORID CHEEKS AND HIS UNCULTIVATED BEARD, WAS CAPABLE OF MURDER.
WANNANOTHER?
UH, I--
COFFEE. REGULAR. DARK.
IT'S A COVER UP, ISN'T IT? THEY KNOW WHO DID IT.
THEY GOT THE EVIDENCE-- THEY'RE JUST KEEPING US IN THE FUCKING DARK. THERE'S SOMETHING DOWN THERE THAT'S NOT HUMAN.
SEE, THEY DO ALL THIS CLONING STUFF AND IT GETS OUT OF HAND. THEY COULD BE GROWING MONSTERS FOR ALL WE KNOW.
KAUFMAN FOUND THE MAN'S CERTAINTY ATTRACTIVE. MONSTERS ON THE PROWL. SIX HEADS: A DOZEN EYES. WHY NOT?
LAY YOU ANYTHING.
HE KNEW WHY NOT. BECAUSE THAT EXCUSED HIS CITY: THAT LET HER OFF THE HOOK.
AND KAUFMAN BELIEVED IN HIS HEART THAT THE MONSTERS TO BE FOUND IN THE TUNNELS WERE PERFECTLY HUMAN.

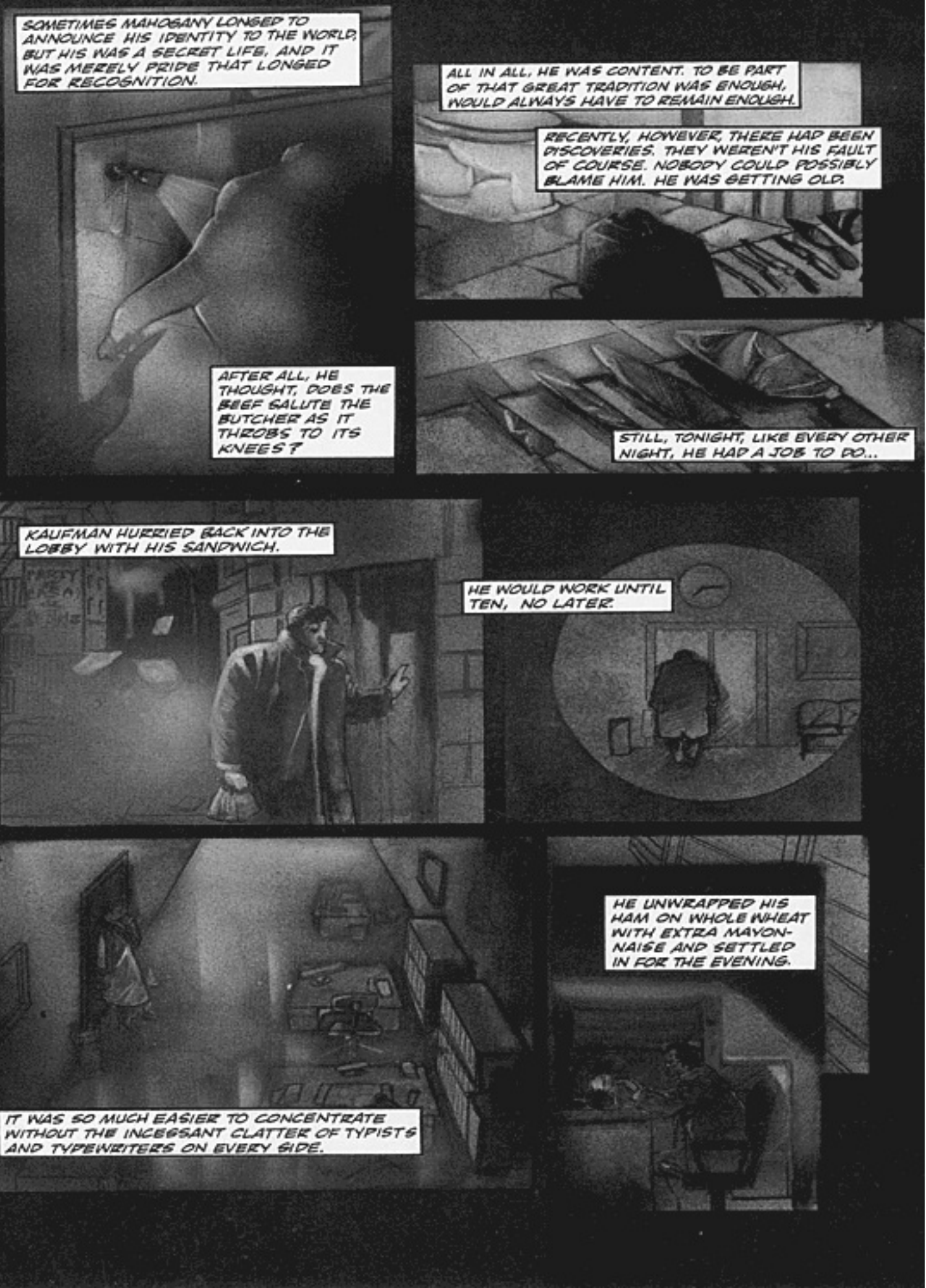

IT WAS COMING UP TO SIX WHEN MAHOGANY WOKE. THE MORNING RAIN HAD TURNED INTO A LIGHT DRIZZLE BY TWILIGHT.

AFTER A HARD DAY'S WORK NEW YORK WAS ON ITS WAY HOME: TO PLAY, TO MAKE LOVE. PEOPLE WERE STREAMING OUT OF THEIR OFFICES AND INTO THEIR AUTOMOBILES.
SOME WOULD BE TESTY AFTER A DAY'S SWEATY LABOR IN A BADLY-AIRED OFFICE; OTHERS, BENIGN AS SHEEP, WOULD BE WANDERING HOME DOWN THE AVENUES, USHERED ALONG BY A CEASELESS CURRENT OF BODIES.
BIG BEEF
STILL OTHERS WOULD EVEN NOW BE CRAMMING ON TO THE SUBWAY, BLIND TO THE GRAFFITI ON EVERY WALL, DEAF TO THE BABBLE OF THEIR OWN VOICES, AND TO THE COLD THUNDER OF THE TUNNELS.


IT PLEASED MAHOGANY TO THINK OF THAT. HE WAS, AFTER ALL, NOT ONE OF THE COMMON HERD.
HE COULD STAND AT HIS WINDOW AND LOOK DOWN ON A THOUSAND HEADS BELOW HIM, AND KNOW HE WAS A CHOSEN MAN.


HE HAD DEADLINES TO MEET, OF COURSE, LIKE THE PEOPLE IN THE STREET. BUT HIS WORK WAS NOT THEIR SENSELESS LABOR, IT WAS MORE LIKE A SACRED DUTY.


HE WAS IN A GREAT TRADITION, THAT STRETCHED FURTHER BACK THAN AMERICA. HE WAS A NIGHT-STALKER: LIKE JACK THE RIPPER, LIKE GILLES DE RAIS, A LIVING EMBODIMENT OF DEATH, A WRAITH WITH A HUMAN FACE.


SOMETIMES MAHOGANY LONGED TO ANNOUNCE HIS IDENTITY TO THE WORLD, BUT HIS WAS A SECRET LIFE, AND IT WAS MERELY PRIDE THAT LONGED FOR RECOGNITION.
AFTER ALL, HE THOUGHT, DOES THE BEEF SALUTE THE BUTCHER AS IT THROBS TO ITS KNEES?
ALL IN ALL, HE WAS CONTENT. TO BE PART OF THAT GREAT TRADITION WAS ENOUGH, WOULD ALWAYS HAVE TO REMAIN ENOUGH.
RECENTLY, HOWEVER, THERE HAD BEEN DISCOVERIES. THEY WEREN'T HIS FAULT OF COURSE. NOBODY COULD POSSIBLY BLAME HIM. HE WAS GETTING OLD.
STILL, TONIGHT, LIKE EVERY OTHER NIGHT, HE HAD A JOB TO DO...
KAUFMAN HURRIED BACK INTO THE LOBBY WITH HIS SANDWICH.
HE WOULD WORK UNTIL TEN, NO LATER.
IT WAS SO MUCH EASIER TO CONCENTRATE WITHOUT THE INCESSANT CLATTER OF TYPISTS AND TYPEWRITERS ON EVERY SIDE.
HE UNWRAPPED HIS HAM ON WHOLE WHEAT WITH EXTRA MAYONNAISE AND SETTLED IN FOR THE EVENING.

IT WAS NINE NOW. THE RAIN CLOUDS HAD CLEARED ENTIRELY. BAG PACKED, MAHOGANY WAS DRESSED FOR THE NIGHTSHIFT.

ABOVE ALL, HE REMINDED HIMSELF, HE MUST BE CAREFUL.

THERE WOULD BE EYES ON HIM EVERY STEP OF THE WAY, WATCHING HIS PERFORMANCE TONIGHT, AND JUDGING IT.

IF THEY ONLY KNEW, HE THOUGHT. THE PEOPLE WHO WALKED, RAN AND SKIPPED PAST HIM ON THE STREETS: WHO COLLIDED WITH HIM WITHOUT APOLOGY: WHO MET HIS GAZE WITH CONTEMPT: WHO SMILED AT HIS BULK, LOOKING UNEASY IN HIS ILL-FITTING SUIT. IF ONLY THEY KNEW WHAT HE DID, WHAT HE WAS AND WHAT HE CARRIED.

TONIGHT HE'D TAKE THE **AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS** AGAIN, HIS FAVORITE LINE, AND OFTEN THE MOST PRODUCTIVE.

THE SMELL OF THE TUNNELS WAS IN HIS NOSTRILS NOW.

NOT THE SMELL OF THE DEEP TUNNELS, OF COURSE. THEY HAD A SCENT ALL OF THEIR OWN.

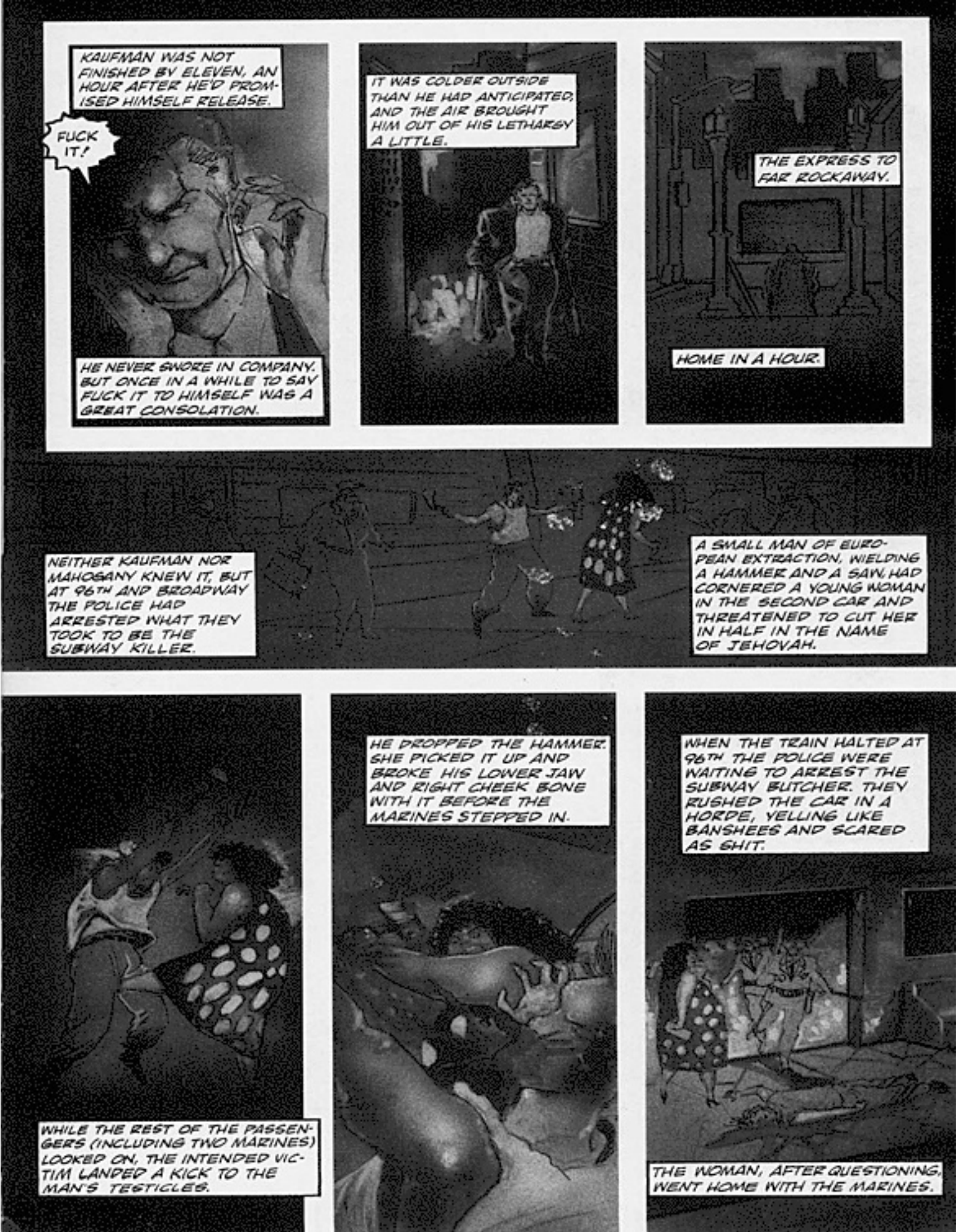
THE REGURGITATED BREATH OF A MILLION TRAVELERS CIRCULATED IN THIS WARREN, MINGLING WITH THE BREATH OF CREATURES FAR OLDER; THINGS WITH VOICES SOFT LIKE CLAY, WHOSE APPETITES WERE ABOMINABLE. HOW HE LOVED IT. THE SCENT, THE DARK, THE THUNDER.

HE LINGERED IN THE STATION FOR OVER AN HOUR. THERE WAS SO LITTLE OF QUALITY AROUND IT WAS DISPIRITING.

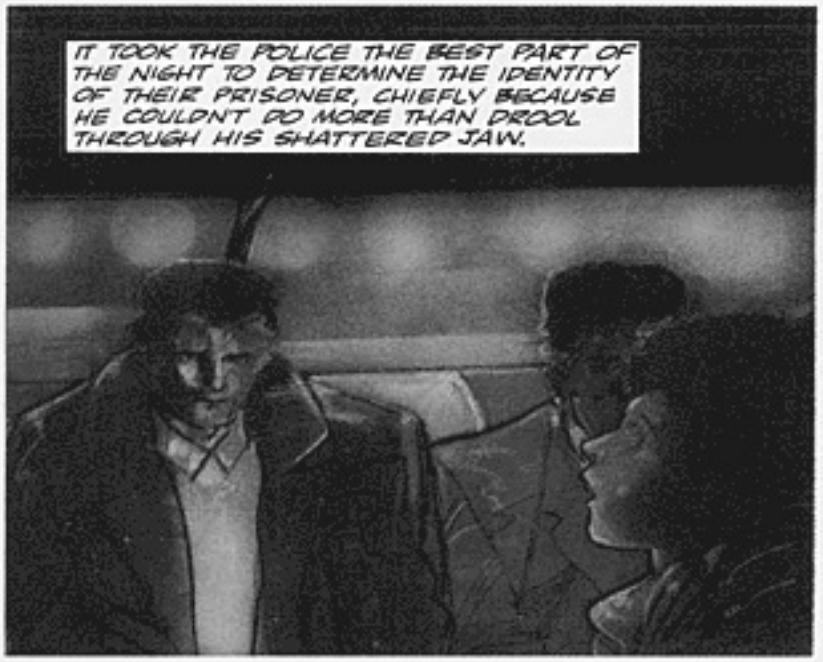
HE HAD NOT SEEN A SINGLE CREATURE WHO WAS REALLY IDEAL FOR SLAUGHTER.

THE HEADLINE OF THE NEW YORK POST, DISCARDED ON THE SEAT ACROSS FROM HIM, CAUGHT MAHOGANY'S EYE: "POLICE ALL-OUT TO CATCH KILLER." HE COULDN'T RESIST A SMILE. AFTER ALL, WASN'T HIS CAREER SANCTIONED BY THE HIGHEST POSSIBLE AUTHORITIES?

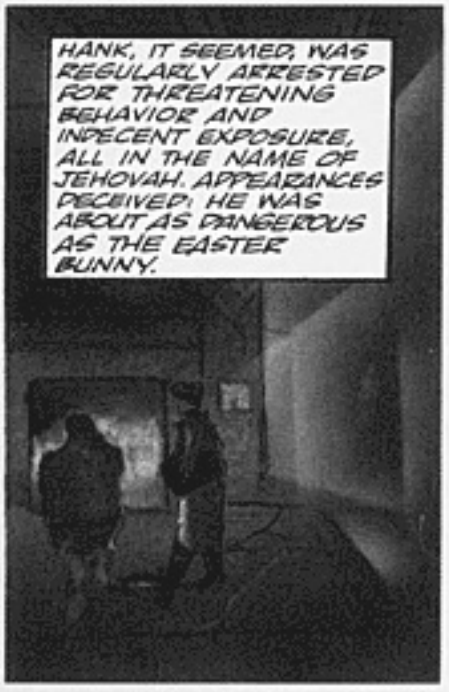
THE VERY FORCES OF LAW AND ORDER THAT MADE SUCH A SHOW OF HIS PURSUIT SERVED HIS MASTERS NO LESS THAN HE; MAHOGANY WAS A PROTECTED MAN, ABOVE EVERY LAW ON THE STATUTE BOOKS.


KAUFMAN WAS NOT FINISHED BY ELEVEN, AN HOUR AFTER HE'D PROMISED HIMSELF RELEASE.
FUCK IT!
HE NEVER SMOKE IN COMPANY. BUT ONCE IN A WHILE TO SAY FUCK IT TO HIMSELF WAS A GREAT CONSOLATION.
IT WAS COLDER OUTSIDE THAN HE HAD ANTICIPATED, AND THE AIR BROUGHT HIM OUT OF HIS LETHARGY A LITTLE.
THE EXPRESS TO FAR ROCKAWAY.
HOME IN A HOUR.
NEITHER KAUFMAN NOR MAHOGANY KNEW IT, BUT AT 96TH AND BROADWAY THE POLICE HAD ARRESTED WHAT THEY TOOK TO BE THE SUBWAY KILLER.
A SMALL MAN OF EUROPEAN EXTRACTION, WIELDING A HAMMER AND A SAW, HAD CORNERED A YOUNG WOMAN IN THE SECOND CAR AND THREATENED TO CUT HER IN HALF IN THE NAME OF JEHOVAH.
WHILE THE REST OF THE PASSENGERS (INCLUDING TWO MARINES) LOOKED ON, THE INTENDED VICTIM LANDED A KICK TO THE MAN'S TESTICLES.
HE DROPPED THE HAMMER. SHE PICKED IT UP AND BROKE HIS LOWER JAW AND RIGHT CHEEK BONE WITH IT BEFORE THE MARINES STEPPED IN.
WHEN THE TRAIN HALTED AT 96TH THE POLICE WERE WAITING TO ARREST THE SUBWAY BUTCHER. THEY RUSHED THE CAR IN A HORDE, YELLING LIKE BANSHEES AND SCARED AS SHIT.
THE WOMAN, AFTER QUESTIONING, WENT HOME WITH THE MARINES.

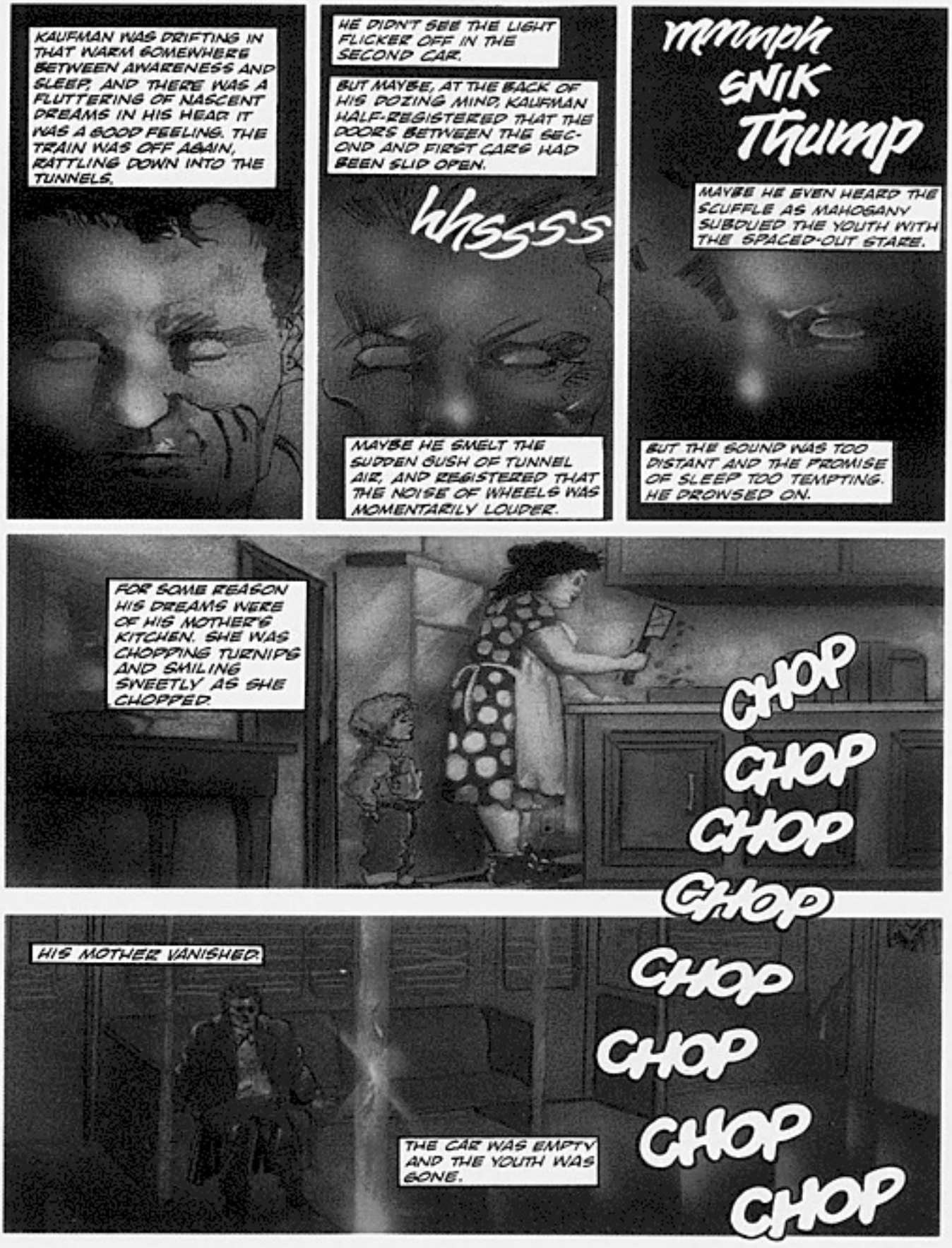
IT WAS TO BE A USEFUL DIVERSION, THOUGH MAHOGANY COULDN'T KNOW IT AT THE TIME.


IT TOOK THE POLICE THE BEST PART OF THE NIGHT TO DETERMINE THE IDENTITY OF THEIR PRISONER, CHIEFLY BECAUSE HE COULDN'T DO MORE THAN DROOL THROUGH HIS SHATTERED JAW.

IT WASN'T UNTIL THREE-THIRTY IN THE MORNING THAT ONE CAPTAIN DAVIS, COMING ON DUTY, RECOGNIZED THE MAN AS A RETIRED FLOWER SALESMAN FROM THE BRONX CALLED HANK VASARELY.


HANK, IT SEEMED, WAS REGULARLY ARRESTED FOR THREATENING BEHAVIOR AND INDECENT EXPOSURE, ALL IN THE NAME OF JEHOVAH. APPEARANCES DECEIVED: HE WAS ABOUT AS DANGEROUS AS THE EASTER BUNNY.

BUT BY THE TIME THE COPS HAD WORKED THAT OUT, MAHOGANY HAD BEEN ABOUT HIS BUSINESS A LONG WHILE.


KAUFMAN WAS DRIFTING IN THAT WARM SOMEWHERE BETWEEN AWARENESS AND SLEEP. AND THERE WAS A FLUTTERING OF NASCENT DREAMS IN HIS HEAD. IT WAS A GOOD FEELING. THE TRAIN WAS OFF AGAIN, RATTLING DOWN INTO THE TUNNELS.
HE DIDN'T SEE THE LIGHT FLICKER OFF IN THE SECOND CAR.
BUT MAYBE, AT THE BACK OF HIS DOZING MIND, KAUFMAN HALF-REGISTERED THAT THE DOORS BETWEEN THE SECOND AND FIRST CARS HAD BEEN SLID OPEN.
WHSSSS
MAYBE HE SMELT THE SUDDEN GUSH OF TUNNEL AIR, AND REGISTERED THAT THE NOISE OF WHEELS WAS MOMENTARILY LOUDER.
MMMPH
SNIK
THUMP
MAYBE HE EVEN HEARD THE SCUFFLE AS MAHOSANY SUBDUED THE YOUTH WITH THE SPACED-OUT STARE.
BUT THE SOUND WAS TOO DISTANT AND THE PROMISE OF SLEEP TOO TEMPTING. HE DROWSED ON.
FOR SOME REASON HIS DREAMS WERE OF HIS MOTHER'S KITCHEN. SHE WAS CHOPPING TURNIPS AND SMILING SWEETLY AS SHE CHOPPED.
CHOP
CHOP
CHOP
CHOP
CHOP
CHOP
CHOP
CHOP
HIS MOTHER VANISHED.
THE CAR WAS EMPTY AND THE YOUTH WAS GONE.

KLAKA KLAKA KLAK
HOW LONG HAD HE BEEN DOZING? HE HADN'T REMEMBERED THE TRAIN STOPPING AT WEST 4TH STREET.
THE TRAIN SEEMED TO HAVE GATHERED QUITE A SUBSTANTIAL HEAD OF SPEED.

A LITTLE CONCERN CREPT INTO KAUFMAN'S SOBER HEAD. PERHAPS THEY'D PASSED FAR ROCKAWAY AND THE TRAIN WAS NOW SPEEDING ON ITS WAY TO WHEREVER THEY TOOK TRAINS FOR THE NIGHT.
FUCK IT.
SHOULD HE GO FORWARD AND ASK THE DRIVER? IT WAS SUCH A BLOODY IDIOT QUESTION TO ASK: WHERE AM I?
THEN THE TRAIN BEGAN TO SLOW.

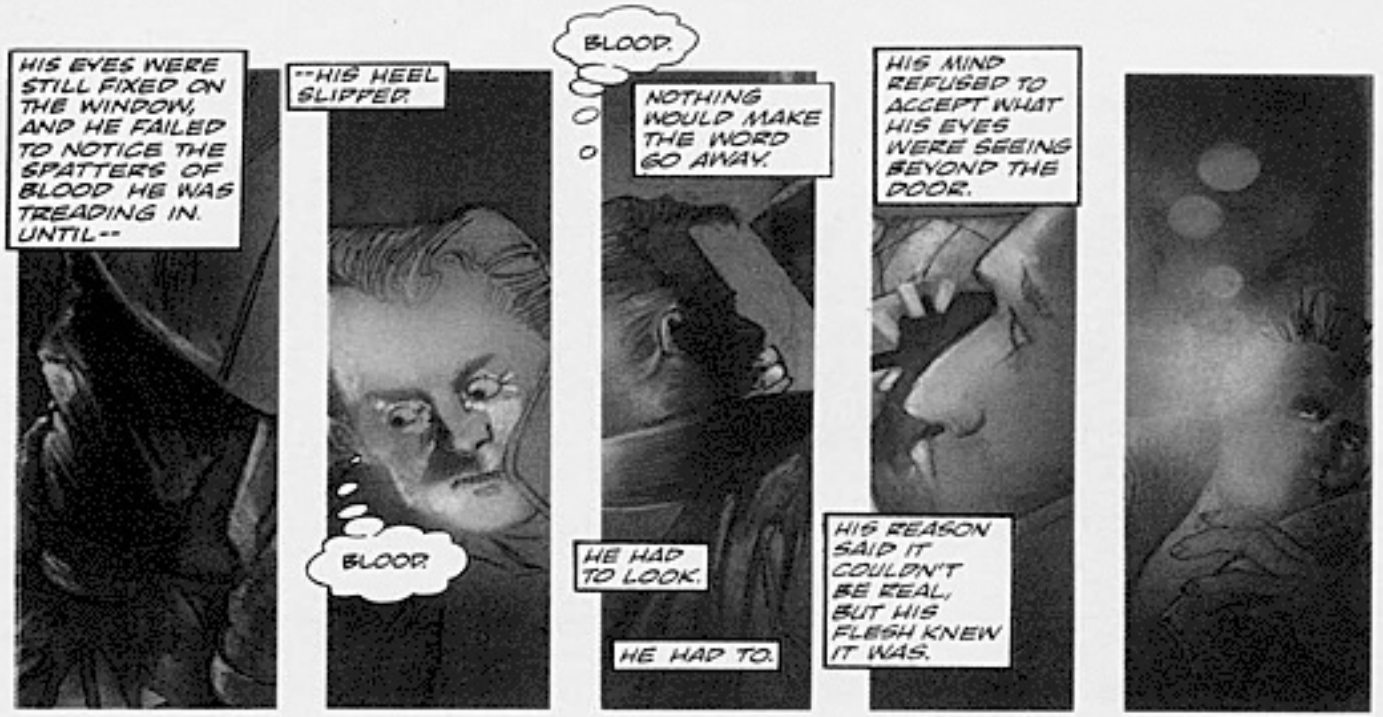
A STATION. YES, A STATION. THE TRAIN EMERGED FROM THE TUNNEL AND INTO THE DIRTY LIGHT OF THE STATION AT WEST 4TH STREET. HE'D MISSED NO STOPS.
SO WHERE HAD THE BOY GONE?

PROBABLY BETWEEN THE DRIVER'S LEGS EVEN NOW, KAUFMAN THOUGHT, HIS LIP CURLING. IT WASN'T UNHEARD OF.
THIS WAS THE PALACE OF DELIGHTS, AFTER ALL, AND EVERYONE HAD THEIR RIGHT TO A LITTLE LOVE IN THE DARK.

WHAT DID HE CARE WHERE THE BOY HAD GONE?
RRRRR RIIIPPPPP
THE SUDDEN FEAR OF BEING LOST HAD SHARPENED HIS SENSES.

RRRRRRIIIPPPP
EVEN OVER THE TRAIN'S CLATTER, HE HEARD THE SOUND OF TEARING CLOTH COMING FROM THE NEXT CAR.
WAS IT RAPE?

WITH NO MORE THAN A MILD VOYEURISTIC URGE, HE MOVED DOWN THE SEE-SAWING CAR TOWARDS THE INTERSECTING DOOR, HOPING HE MIGHT GET A PEEK.


HIS EYES WERE STILL FIXED ON THE WINDOW, AND HE FAILED TO NOTICE THE SPATTERS OF BLOOD HE WAS TREADING IN. UNTIL--
--HIS HEEL SLIPPED.
BLOOD.
BLOOD.
NOTHING WOULD MAKE THE WORD GO AWAY.
HE HAD TO LOOK.
HE HAD TO.
HIS MIND REFUSED TO ACCEPT WHAT HIS EYES WERE SEEING BEYOND THE DOOR.
HIS REASON SAID IT COULDN'T BE REAL, BUT HIS FLESH KNEW IT WAS.

KAUFMAN WAS UNCONSCIOUS WHEN THE TRAIN REACHED JAY STREET. HE WAS DEAF TO THE DRIVER'S ANNOUNCEMENT THAT ALL TRAVELERS BEYOND THAT STATION WOULD HAVE TO CHANGE TRAINS.
HAD HE HEARD THIS, HE WOULD HAVE QUESTIONED THE SENSE OF IT. NO TRAINS DISGORGED ALL THEIR PASSENGERS AT JAY STREET. HE WOULD HAVE ASKED WHAT KIND OF TRAIN THIS COULD BE. EXCEPT THAT HE ALREADY KNEW.
THIS WAS THE MIDNIGHT MEAT TRAIN.

THERE'S NO ACCOUNTING FOR TIME IN A DEAD FAINT. IT COULD HAVE BEEN SECONDS OR HOURS THAT PASSED BEFORE KAUFMAN'S EYES FLICKERED OPEN AGAIN.
HE LAY UNDER ONE OF THE SEATS NOW, HIDDEN FROM VIEW. FATE WAS WITH HIM SO FAR HE THOUGHT: SOMEHOW THE ROCKING OF THE CAR MUST HAVE JOCKEYED HIS UNCONSCIOUS BODY OUT OF SIGHT.
HE THOUGHT OF THE HORROR IN CAR TWO, AND SWALLOWED BACK VOMIT. HE WAS ALONE.
KAUFMAN'S TEETH WERE SHAKING IN THEIR SOCKETS AND HIS FACE FELT NUMB WITH THE VIBRATION; EVEN HIS SKULL WAS ACHING.
WHICHEVER WAY HE TURNED, THE NAME ON THE DOOR WAS DEATH.
HE COVERED HIS HEAD WITH HIS HANDS AND CLOSED HIS EYES AS TIGHTLY AS ANY CHILD IN TERROR OF THE BOGEYMAN.
A RUSH OF AIR UP FROM THE RAILS. IT SMELT STRANGER THAN ANY KAUFMAN HAD SMELT BEFORE: AND COLDER. THIS WAS SOMEHOW PRIMAL AIR IN HIS NOSTRILS, HOSTILE AND UNFATHOMABLE AIR. IT MADE HIM SHUDDER.
KLIK
whisshh
THE BUTCHER WAS CLOSE, KAUFMAN KNEW IT. HE COULD BE STANDING NO MORE THAN A MATTER OF INCHES FROM WHERE HE LAY.
KLIK
WAS HE EVEN NOW LOOKING DOWN AT KAUFMAN'S BACK? EVEN NOW BENDING, KNIFE IN HAND, TO SCOOP KAUFMAN OUT OF HIS HIDING PLACE, LIKE A SNAIL HOOKED FROM ITS SHELL?
NOTHING HAPPENED. HE FELT NO BREATH ON HIS NECK. HIS SPINE WAS NOT SLIT OPEN.
THERE WAS SIMPLY A CLATTER OF FEET CLOSE TO KAUFMAN'S HEAD, THEN THAT SAME SOUND RECEDING.
KAUFMAN'S BREATH, HELD IN HIS LUNGS 'TIL THEY HURT, WAS EXPELLED IN A RASP BETWEEN HIS TEETH.

MAHOGANY WAS ALMOST DISAPPOINTED THAT THE SLEEPING MAN HAD ALIGHTED AT WEST 4TH STREET. HE WAS HOPING FOR ONE MORE JOB TO DO THAT NIGHT, TO KEEP HIM OCCUPIED WHILE THEY DESCENDED. BUT NO: THE MAN HAD GONE.

THE POTENTIAL VICTIM HADN'T LOOKED THAT HEALTHY ANYWAY, HE THOUGHT TO HIMSELF, HE WAS AN ANEMIC JEWISH ACCOUNTANT PROBABLY. THE MEAT WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN OF ANY QUALITY.

MY CHRIST, THOUGHT KAUFMAN, HE'S GOING TO KILL THE DRIVER!

HI.

HI.

THEY KNEW EACH OTHER.

ALL DONE ?

ALL DONE.

HA HA HA

THERE WAS LAUGHTER NOW. KAUFMAN CALCULATED THE RISKS OF HIS SITUATION: THE MATHEMATICS OF PANIC.

WHICH WAS WORSE: STASIS, AND MEETING HIS DEATH TRAPPED IN A HOLE; OR MAKING A BREAK FOR IT AND CONFRONTING HIS MAKER IN THE MIDDLE OF THE CAR ?

KAUFMAN SURPRISED HIMSELF WITH HIS METTLE: HE'D MOVE.

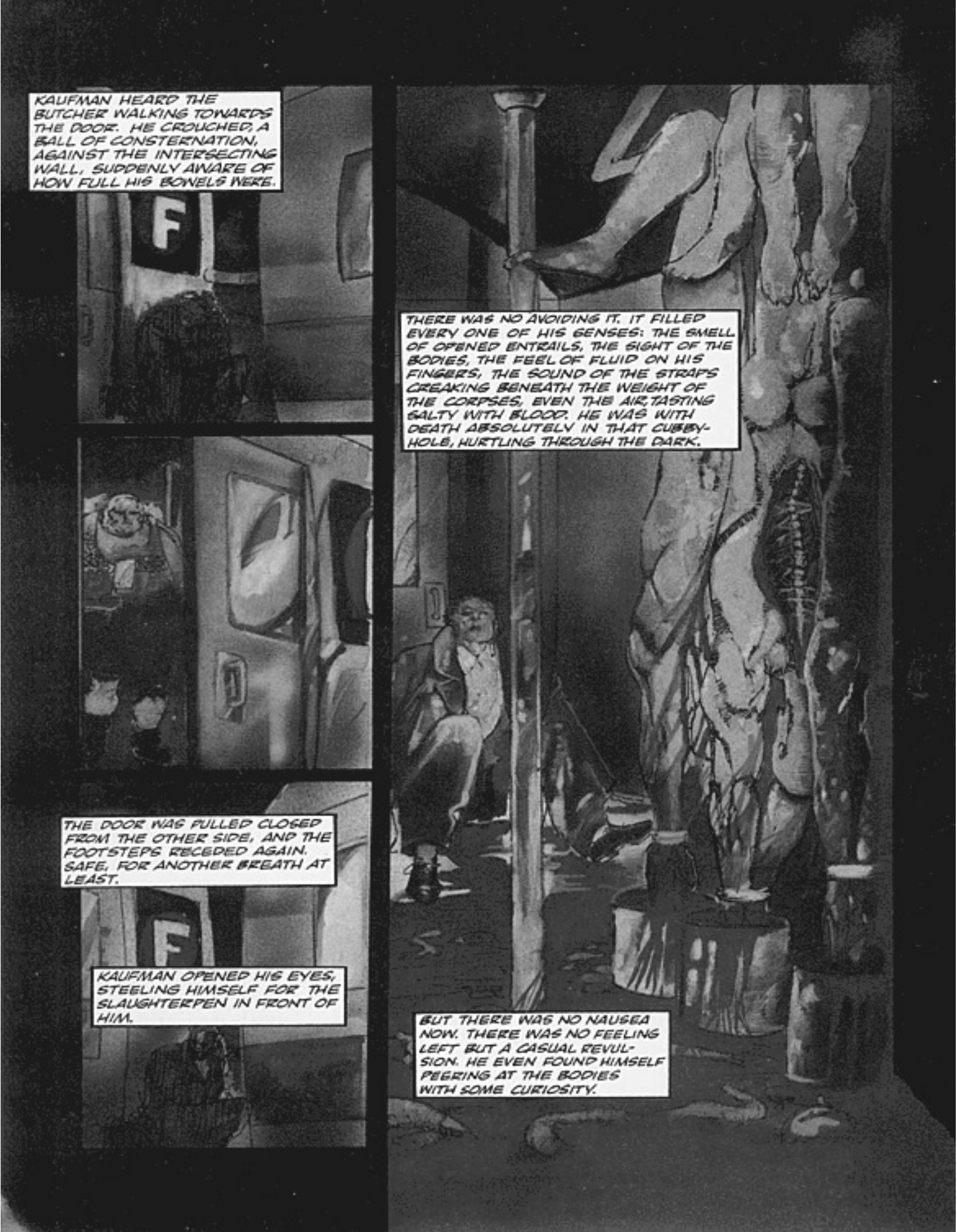
THE NOISE OF THE RAILS INCREASED, AND A WAVE OF DANK AIR, STINKING OF NOTHING ON EARTH, CAME UP AT HIM. SURELY THE BUTCHER MUST HEAR, OR SMELL ? SURELY HE MUST TURN--

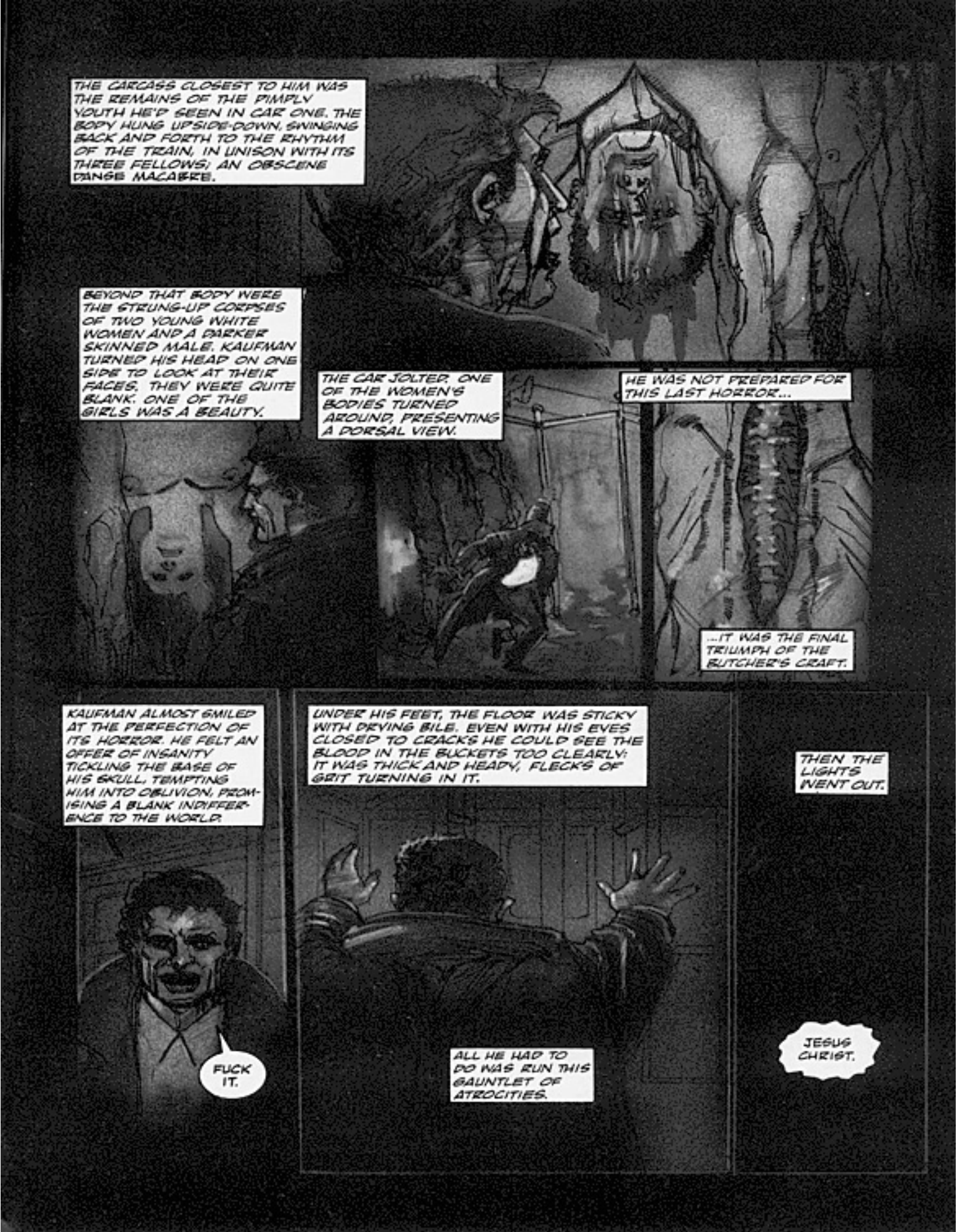
BUT NO. KAUFMAN SKINNED HIS WAY THROUGH THE SLIT HE HAD OPENED AND SO THROUGH INTO THE BLOODY CHAMBER BEYOND.

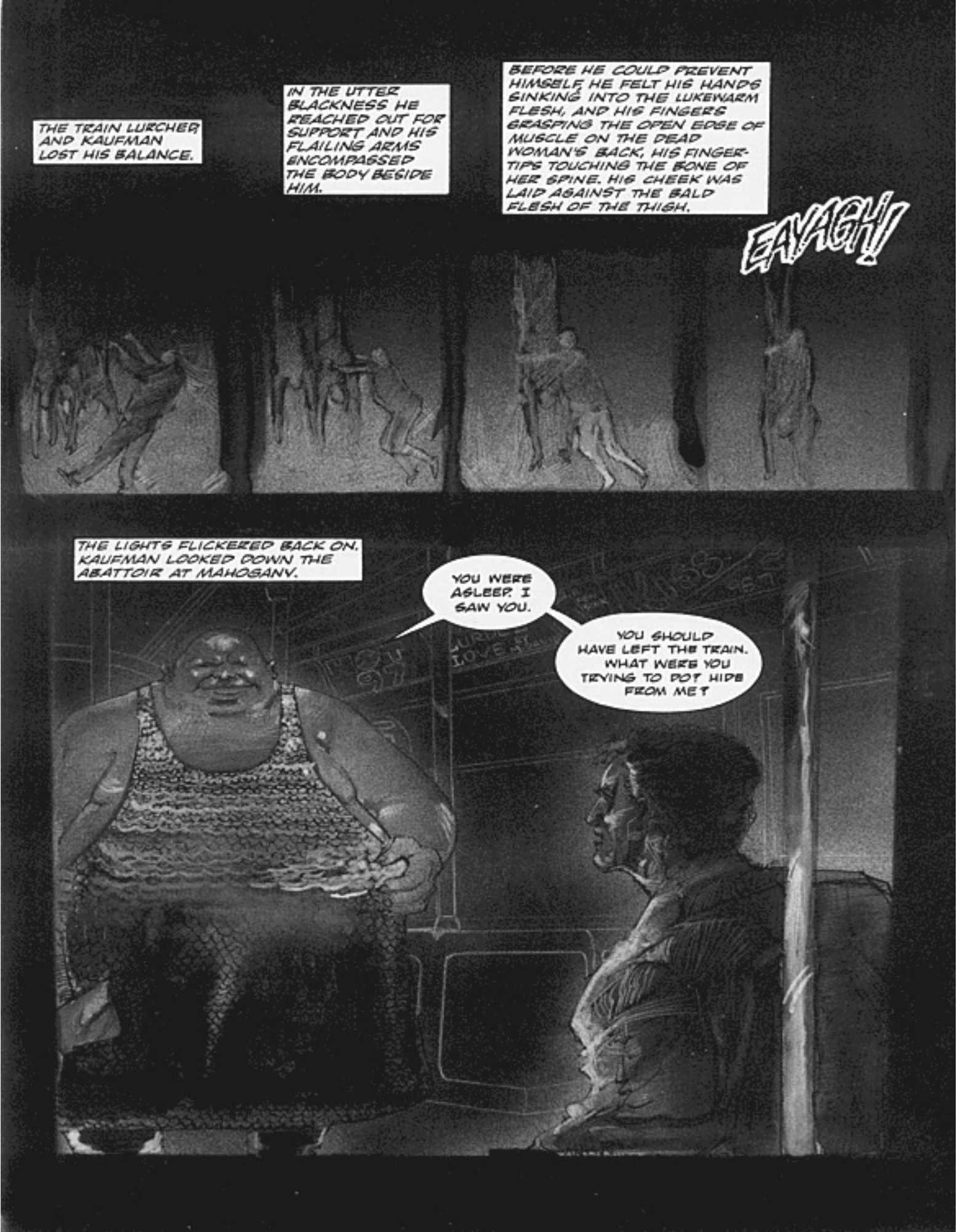
RELIEF MADE HIM CARELESS. HE FAILED TO LATCH THE DOOR BEHIND HIM.

WHAT THE FUCK'S THAT ?

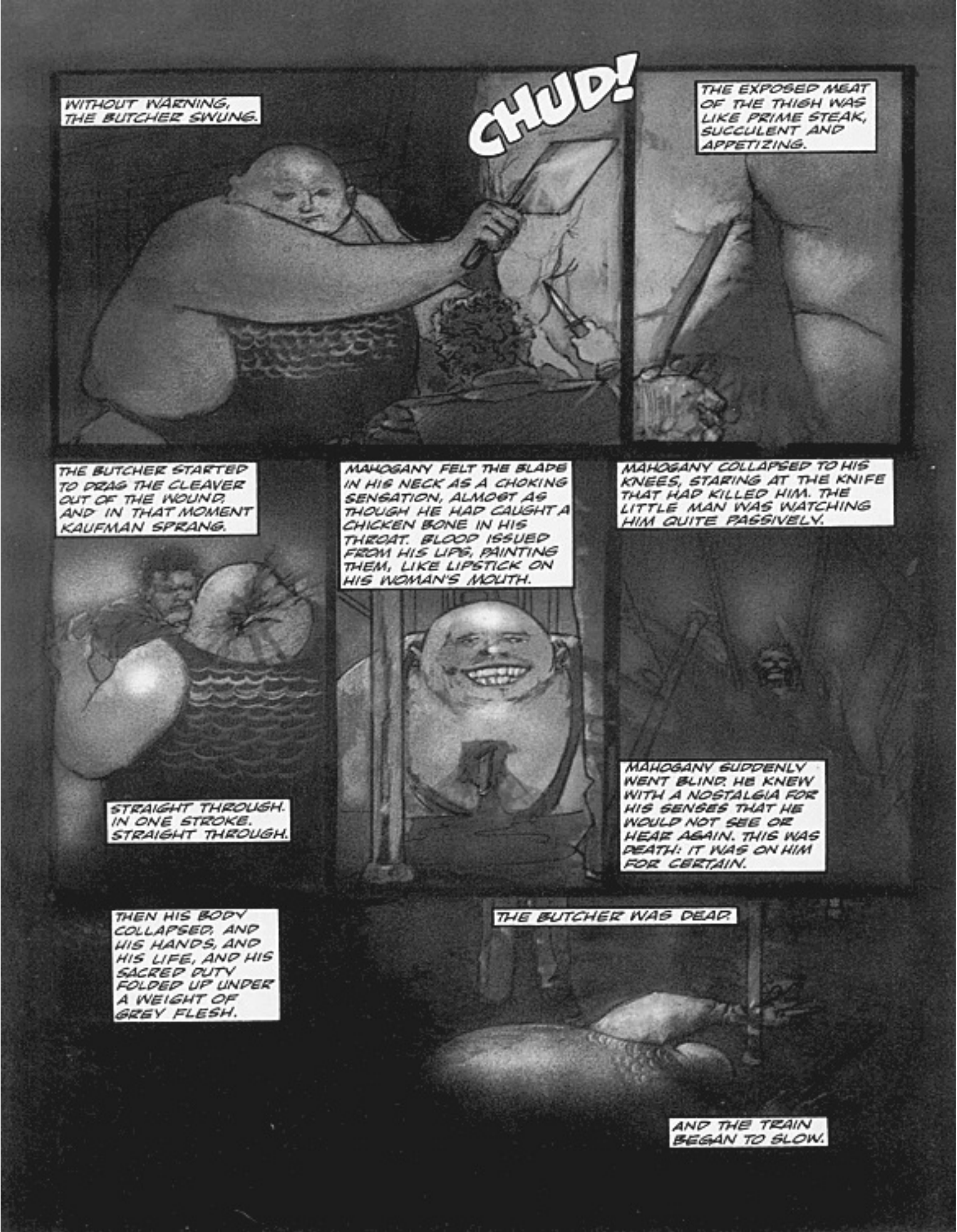
DIDN'T CLOSE THE DOOR PROPERLY, THAT'S ALL.

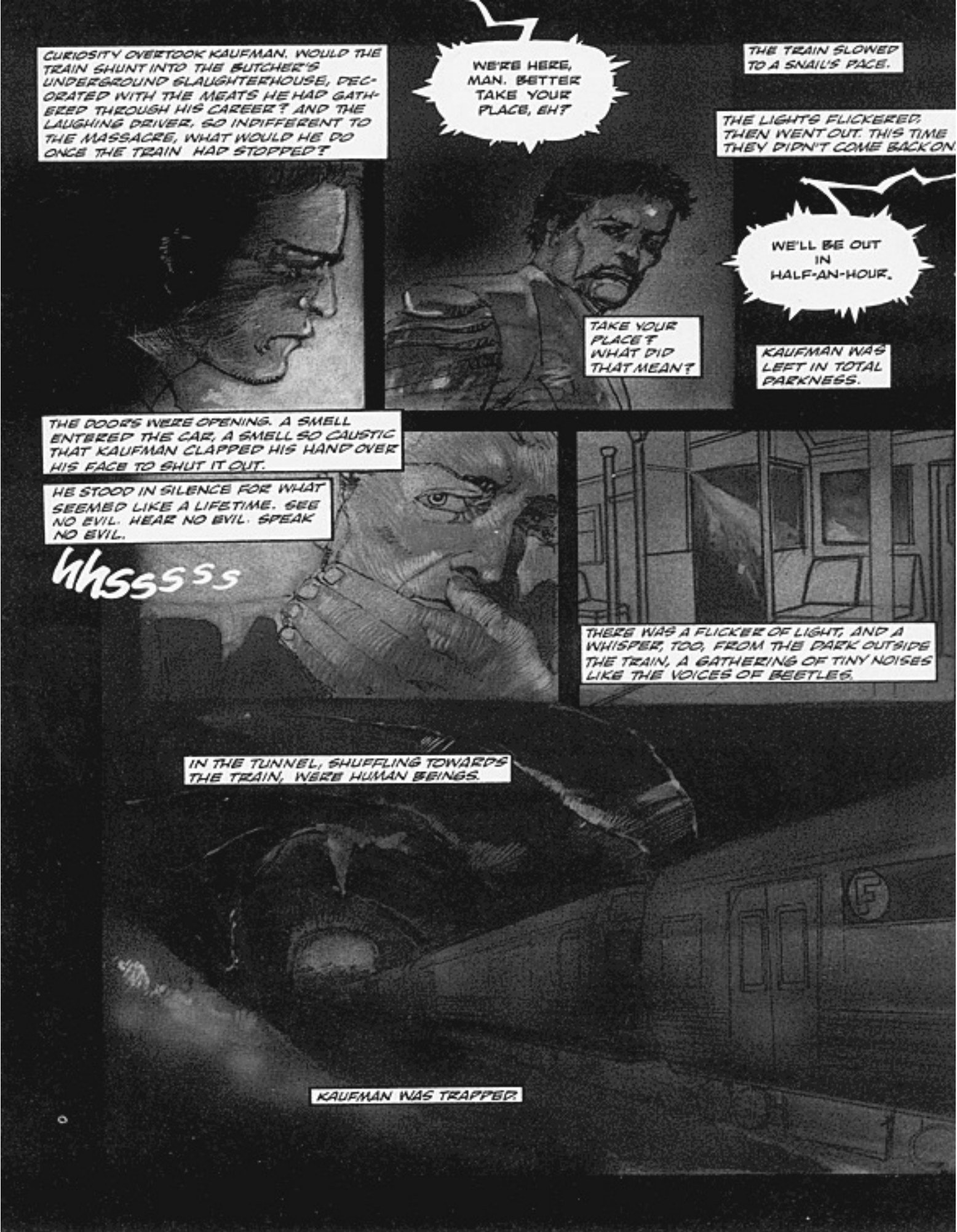

KAUFMAN HEARD THE BUTCHER WALKING TOWARDS THE DOOR. HE CROUCHED, A BALL OF CONSTERNATION, AGAINST THE INTERSECTING WALL, SUDDENLY AWARE OF HOW FULL HIS BOWELS WERE.
THERE WAS NO AVOIDING IT. IT FILLED EVERY ONE OF HIS SENSES: THE SMELL OF OPENED ENTRAILS, THE SIGHT OF THE BODIES, THE FEEL OF FLUID ON HIS FINGERS, THE SOUND OF THE STRAPS CREAKING BENEATH THE WEIGHT OF THE CORPSES, EVEN THE AIR, TASTING SALTY WITH BLOOD. HE WAS WITH DEATH ABSOLUTELY IN THAT CUBBY-HOLE, HURTLING THROUGH THE DARK.
THE DOOR WAS PULLED CLOSED FROM THE OTHER SIDE, AND THE FOOTSTEPS RECEDED AGAIN. SAFE, FOR ANOTHER BREATH AT LEAST.
KAUFMAN OPENED HIS EYES, STEELING HIMSELF FOR THE SLAUGHTERPEN IN FRONT OF HIM.
BUT THERE WAS NO NAUSEA NOW. THERE WAS NO FEELING LEFT BUT A CASUAL REVULSION. HE EVEN FOUND HIMSELF PEERING AT THE BODIES WITH SOME CURIOSITY.


THE CARCASS CLOSEST TO HIM WAS THE REMAINS OF THE PIMPLY YOUTH HE'D SEEN IN CAR ONE. THE BODY HUNG UPSIDE-DOWN, SWINGING BACK AND FORTH TO THE RHYTHM OF THE TRAIN, IN UNISON WITH ITS THREE FELLOWS; AN OBSCENE DANSE MACABRE.
BEYOND THAT BODY WERE THE STRUNG-UP CORPSES OF TWO YOUNG WHITE WOMEN AND A DARKER SKINNED MALE. KAUFMAN TURNED HIS HEAD ON ONE SIDE TO LOOK AT THEIR FACES. THEY WERE QUITE BLANK. ONE OF THE GIRLS WAS A BEAUTY.
THE CAR JOLTED. ONE OF THE WOMEN'S BODIES TURNED AROUND, PRESENTING A DORSAL VIEW.
HE WAS NOT PREPARED FOR THIS LAST HORROR...
...IT WAS THE FINAL TRIUMPH OF THE BUTCHER'S CRAFT.
KAUFMAN ALMOST SMILED AT THE PERFECTION OF ITS HORROR. HE FELT AN OFFER OF INSANITY TICKLING THE BASE OF HIS SKULL, TEMPTING HIM INTO OBLIVION, PROMISING A BLANK INDIFFERENCE TO THE WORLD.
FUCK IT.
UNDER HIS FEET, THE FLOOR WAS STICKY WITH DRYING BILE. EVEN WITH HIS EYES CLOSED TO CRACKS HE COULD SEE THE BLOOD IN THE BUCKETS TOO CLEARLY: IT WAS THICK AND HEADY, FLECKS OF GRIT TURNING IN IT.
ALL HE HAD TO DO WAS RUN THIS GAUNTLET OF ATROCITIES.
THEN THE LIGHTS WENT OUT.
JESUS CHRIST.


THE TRAIN LURCHED AND KAUFMAN LOST HIS BALANCE.
IN THE UTTER BLACKNESS HE REACHED OUT FOR SUPPORT AND HIS FLAILING ARMS ENCOMPASSED THE BODY BESIDE HIM.
BEFORE HE COULD PREVENT HIMSELF, HE FELT HIS HANDS SINKING INTO THE LUKEWARM FLESH, AND HIS FINGERS GRASPING THE OPEN EDGE OF MUSCLE ON THE DEAD WOMAN'S BACK, HIS FINGER-TIPS TOUCHING THE BONE OF HER SPINE. HIS CHEEK WAS LAID AGAINST THE BALD FLESH OF THE THIGH.
EAYAGH!
THE LIGHTS FLICKERED BACK ON. KAUFMAN LOOKED DOWN THE ABATTOIR AT MAHOGANY.
YOU WERE ASLEEP. I SAW YOU.
YOU SHOULD HAVE LEFT THE TRAIN. WHAT WERE YOU TRYING TO DO? HIDE FROM ME?

GLANCING AROUND FOR A WEAPON, KAUFMAN'S GAZE FELL ON THE PILE OF CLOTHES BESIDE THE PUERTO RICAN'S BODY.
AS IT IS, I'LL HAVE TO DO AWAY WITH YOU.
FUCK IT.
THE KNIFE FELT GOOD IN HIS HAND, IN FACT IT FELT POSITIVELY THRILLING.
YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN THIS-- IT'S NOT FOR THE LIKES OF YOU.
IT'S SECRET.
OH, SO HE'S THE DIVINELY INSPIRED TYPE, THOUGHT KAUFMAN. THAT EXPLAINS SOMETHING.
HE WAS PAST BEING TERRORIZED BY THIS GROSS, SHAMBLING HULK.
WE ALL HAVE TO DIE SOMETIME. YOU SHOULD BE PLEASED--I CAN USE YOU TO FEED THE FATHERS.
FUCK IT.
THE BUTCHER DIDN'T LIKE THE LITTLE MAN'S INDIFFERENCE TO HIS WORK, HIS REPUTATION
A DIRTY LITTLE JEW LIKE YOU SHOULD BE THANKFUL TO BE USEFUL AT ALL. MEAT'S THE BEST YOU CAN ASPIRE TO.


WITHOUT WARNING, THE BUTCHER SWUNG.
CHUD!
THE EXPOSED MEAT OF THE THIGH WAS LIKE PRIME STEAK, SUCCULENT AND APPETIZING.
THE BUTCHER STARTED TO DRAG THE CLEAVER OUT OF THE WOUND. AND IN THAT MOMENT KAUFMAN SPRANG.
STRAIGHT THROUGH. IN ONE STROKE. STRAIGHT THROUGH.
MAHOGANY FELT THE BLADE IN HIS NECK AS A CHOKING SENSATION, ALMOST AS THOUGH HE HAD CAUGHT A CHICKEN BONE IN HIS THROAT. BLOOD ISSUED FROM HIS LIPS, PAINTING THEM, LIKE LIPSTICK ON HIS WOMAN'S MOUTH.
MAHOGANY COLLAPSED TO HIS KNEES, STARING AT THE KNIFE THAT HAD KILLED HIM. THE LITTLE MAN WAS WATCHING HIM QUITE PASSIVELY.
MAHOGANY SUDDENLY WENT BLIND. HE KNEW WITH A NOSTALGIA FOR HIS SENSES THAT HE WOULD NOT SEE OR HEAR AGAIN. THIS WAS DEATH: IT WAS ON HIM FOR CERTAIN.
THEN HIS BODY COLLAPSED, AND HIS HANDS, AND HIS LIFE, AND HIS SACRED DUTY FOLDED UP UNDER A WEIGHT OF GREY FLESH.
THE BUTCHER WAS DEAD.
AND THE TRAIN BEGAN TO SLOW.


CURIOSITY OVERTOOK KAUFMAN. WOULD THE TRAIN SHUNT INTO THE BUTCHER'S UNDERGROUND SLAUGHTERHOUSE, DECORATED WITH THE MEATS HE HAD GATHERED THROUGH HIS CAREER? AND THE LAUGHING DRIVER, SO INDIFFERENT TO THE MASSACRE, WHAT WOULD HE DO ONCE THE TRAIN HAD STOPPED?
WE'RE HERE, MAN. BETTER TAKE YOUR PLACE, EH?
THE TRAIN SLOWED TO A SNAIL'S PACE.
THE LIGHTS FLICKERED, THEN WENT OUT. THIS TIME THEY DIDN'T COME BACK ON.
WE'LL BE OUT IN HALF-AN-HOUR.
TAKE YOUR PLACE? WHAT DID THAT MEAN?
KAUFMAN WAS LEFT IN TOTAL DARKNESS.
THE DOORS WERE OPENING. A SMELL ENTERED THE CAR, A SMELL SO CAUSTIC THAT KAUFMAN CLAPPED HIS HAND OVER HIS FACE TO SHUT IT OUT.
HE STOOD IN SILENCE FOR WHAT SEEMED LIKE A LIFETIME. SEE NO EVIL. HEAR NO EVIL. SPEAK NO EVIL.
hhssssss
THERE WAS A FLICKER OF LIGHT, AND A WHISPER, TOO, FROM THE DARK OUTSIDE THE TRAIN, A GATHERING OF TINY NOISES LIKE THE VOICES OF BEETLES.
IN THE TUNNEL, SHUFFLING TOWARDS THE TRAIN, WERE HUMAN BEINGS.
KAUFMAN WAS TRAPPED.

COULD THERE BE ANY DOUBT AS TO THE INTENTION OF THESE THINGS? THE BUTCHER HAD SLAUGHTERED MEN AND WOMEN AS MEAT FOR THESE CANNIBALS; THEY WERE COMING, LIKE DINERS AT THE DINNER-GONG, TO EAT IN THIS RESTAURANT CAR.

HE COULD NOT LOOK AWAY. NOT THAT TERROR FROZE HIM AS IT HAD AT THE WINDOW. HE SIMPLY WANTED TO WATCH.

THE EFFORT OF CLIMBING INTO THE TRAIN MADE THE CREATURE'S BREATH COARSE. IT SEEMED MORE GERIATRIC THAN PSYCHOTIC; GENERATIONS OF FICTIONAL MAN-EATERS HAD NOT PREPARED KAUFMAN FOR ITS DISTRESSING VULNERABILITY.

THEY WERE COMING IN AT EVERY DOOR, THEIR PULPY, SYPHILITIC BODIES SCARCELY SEXED.

IT SOON DAWNED ON KAUFMAN THAT THE ROTTING FABRIC SLUNG AROUND THEIR SHOULDERS, OR KNOTTED ABOUT THEIR MIDRIFFS, WAS MADE OF HUMAN SKINS.

GRACILE HANDS WERE LAID UPON THE SHANKS OF MEAT, RUNNING UP AND DOWN THE SHAVED FLESH IN A MANNER THAT SUGGESTED SENSUAL PLEASURE. TONGUES WERE DANCING OUT OF MOUTHS, FLECKS OF SPITTLE, LANDING ON THE MEAT. THE EYES OF THE MONSTERS WERE FLICKERING BACK AND FORTH WITH HUNGER AND EXCITEMENT.

EVENTUALLY ONE OF THEM SAW KAUFMAN.
YOU.
KAUFMAN CALCULATED HIS CHANCES. THERE WERE SO MANY, BUT THEY LOOKED SO WEAK, AND THEY HAD NO WEAPONS, BUT THEIR SKIN AND BONES.
THE MONSTER SPOKE AGAIN, ITS VOICE QUITE WELL-MODULATED, WHEN IT FOUND ITSELF, THE PIPING OF A ONCE-CULTURED, ONCE-CHARMING MAN.
YOU CAME AFTER THE OTHER. YES?
OLD ANYWAY.
FUCK YOU.
YOU MUST NOW DO THIS FOR US. WE CANNOT SURVIVE WITHOUT FOOD.
IT DISGUSTS US NO LESS THAN YOU. BUT WE'RE BOUND TO EAT THIS MEAT, OR WE DIE. GOD KNOWS, I HAVE NO APPETITE FOR IT.
THE THING WAS DROOLING NEVERTHELESS.
KAUFMAN REMEMBERED THE BEARDED MAN IN THE DELI. THE TALK OF MONSTERS...
WHAT ARE YOU? ARE YOU ACCIDENTS OF SOME KIND?
WE ARE THE CITY FATHERS, AND MOTHERS, AND DAUGHTERS, AND SONS. THE BUILDERS, THE LAWMAKERS. WE MADE THIS CITY.
NEW YORK?
BEFORE YOU WERE BORN, BEFORE ANYONE LIVING WAS BORN.

"YOU WILL BRING US MORE. MORE MEAT FOR US. THE OTHER ONE WAS WEAK."

"ME? FEED YOU?"

"YOU MUST DO IT FOR US, AND FOR THOSE OLDER THAN US. FOR THOSE BORN BEFORE THE CITY WAS THOUGHT OF, WHEN AMERICA WAS A TIMBERLAND AND DESERT."

KAUFMAN'S GAZE FOLLOWED THE POINTING FINGER INTO THE GLOOM. THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE OUTSIDE THE TRAIN WHICH HE'D FAILED TO SEE BEFORE; MUCH BIGGER THAN ANYTHING HUMAN.

GO ON.

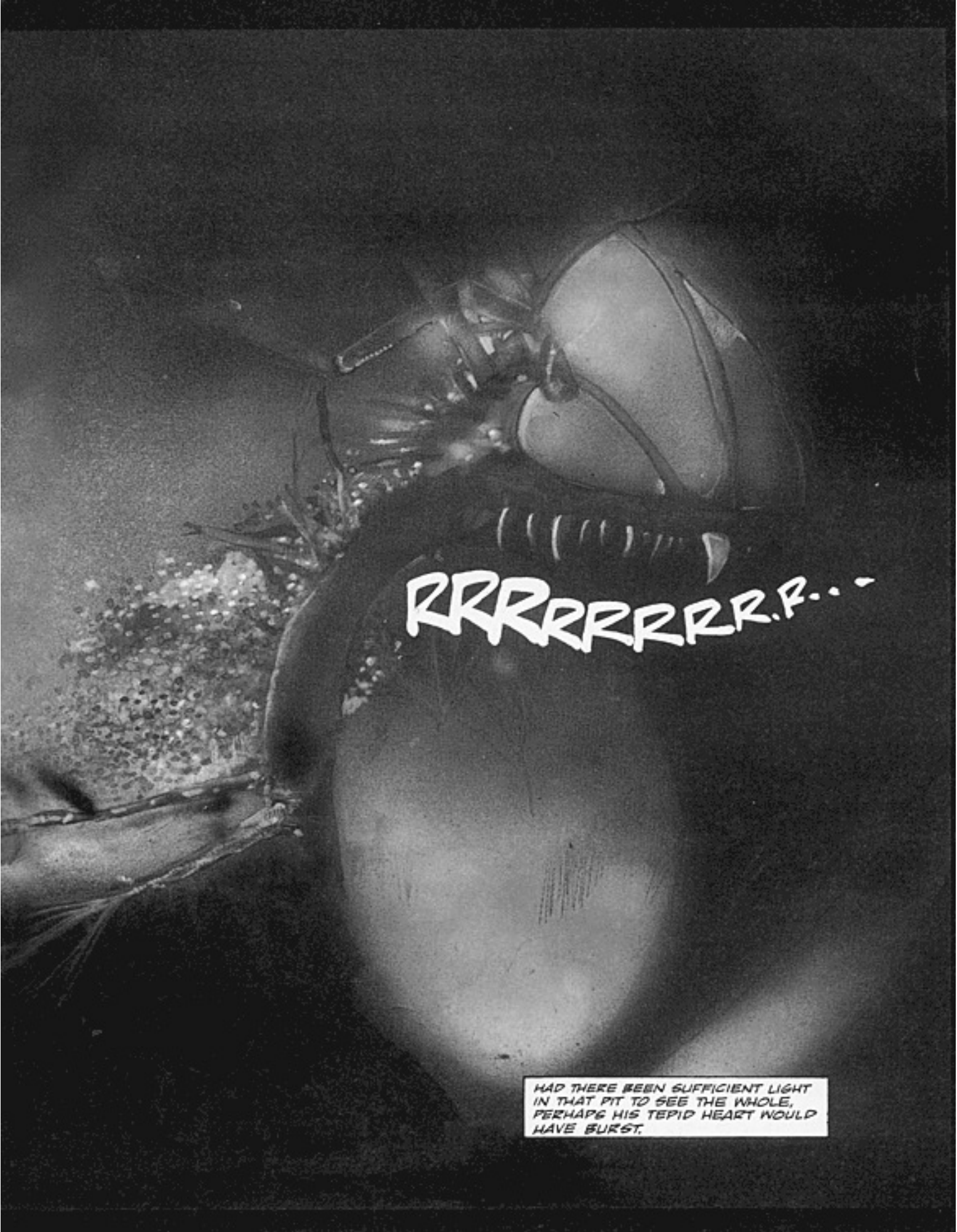
KAUFMAN THOUGHT OF THE CITY HE'D LOVED. WERE THESE REALLY ITS ANCIENTS, ITS PHILOSOPHERS, ITS CREATORS? HE HAD TO BELIEVE IT.

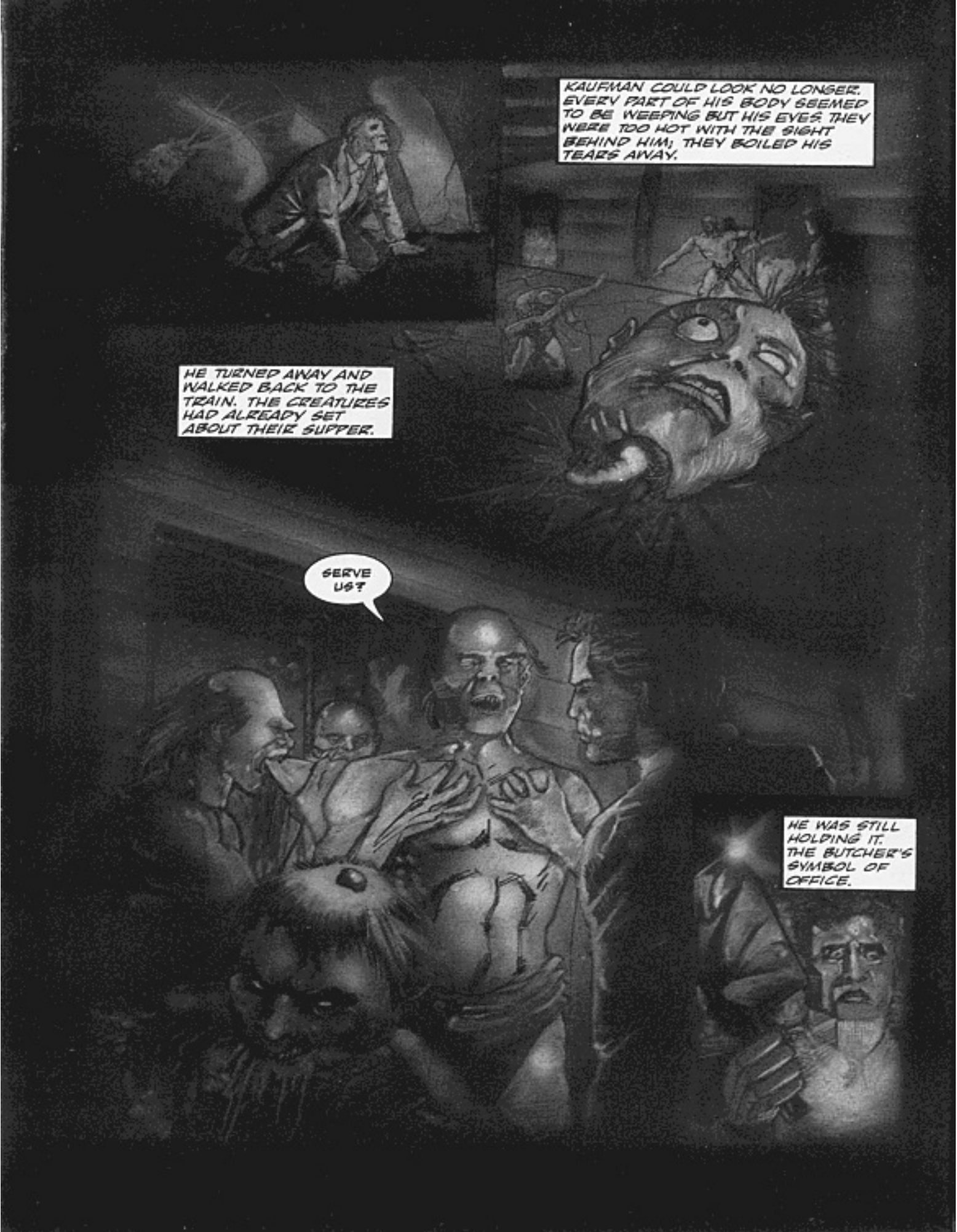
PERHAPS THERE WERE PEOPLE ON THE SURFACE-- BUREAUCRATS, POLITICIANS, AUTHORITIES OF EVERY KIND -- WHO KNEW THIS HORRIBLE SECRET AND WHOSE LIVES WERE DEDICATED TO PRESERVING THESE ABOMINATIONS, FEEDING THEM, AS SAVAGES FEED LAMBS TO THEIR GODS.

THERE WAS A HORRIBLE FAMILIARITY ABOUT THIS RITUAL. IT RANG A BELL-- NOT IN KAUFMAN'S CONSCIOUS MIND, BUT IN HIS DEEPER, OLDER SELF.

IT WAS THERE; THE PRECURSOR OF MAN. THE ORIGINAL AMERICAN, WHOSE HOMELAND THIS WAS BEFORE PASSAMAQUODDY OR CHEYENNE. ITS EYES, IF IT HAD EYES, WERE ON HIM.

HE FELL TO HIS KNEES BEFORE THE FATHER OF FATHERS.


RRRRRRRRR.R...
HAD THERE BEEN SUFFICIENT LIGHT IN THAT PIT TO SEE THE WHOLE, PERHAPS HIS TEPID HEART WOULD HAVE BURST.

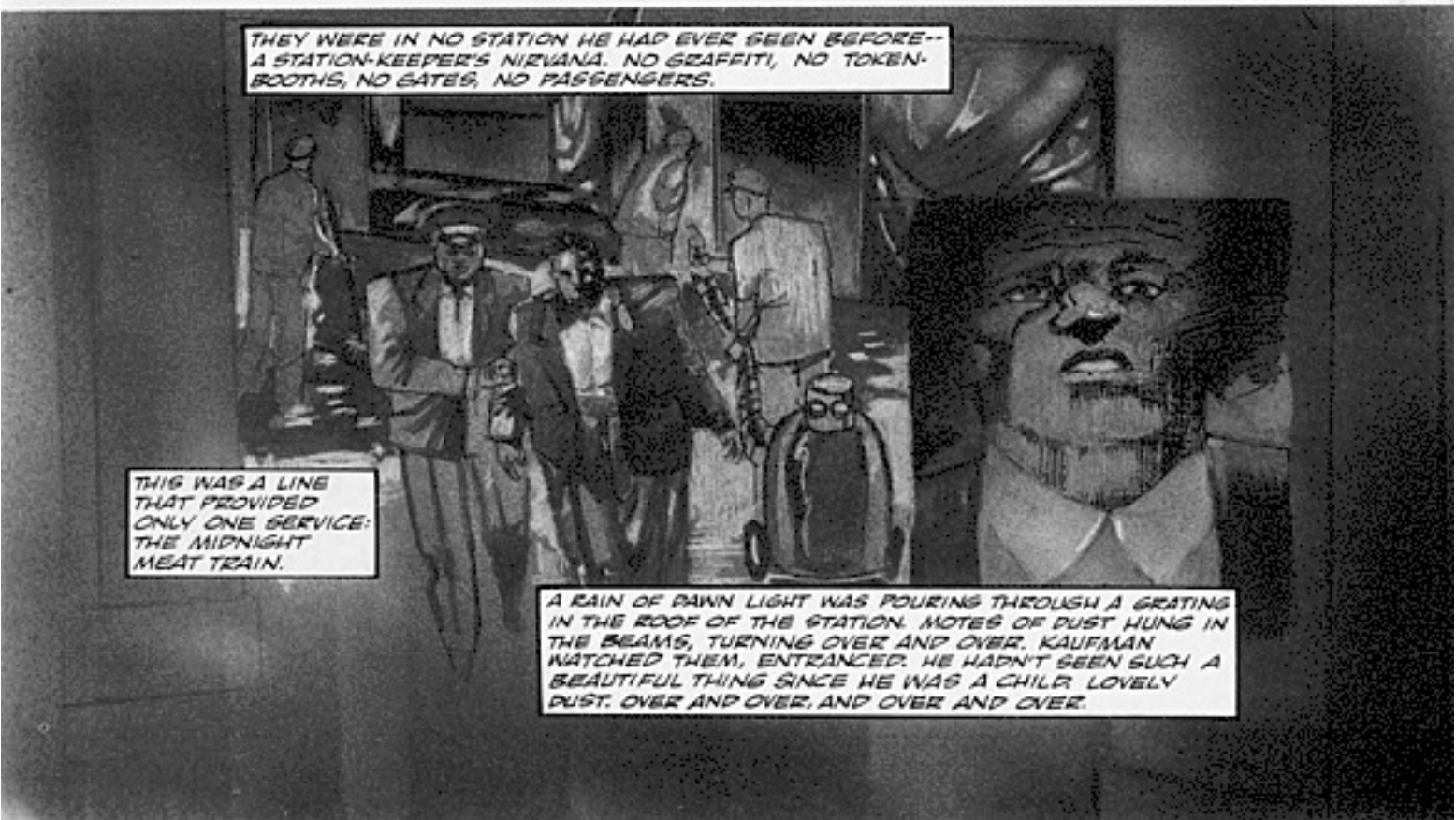

KAUFMAN COULD LOOK NO LONGER. EVERY PART OF HIS BODY SEEMED TO BE WEEPING BUT HIS EYES: THEY WERE TOO HOT WITH THE SIGHT BEHIND HIM; THEY BOILED HIS TEARS AWAY.
HE TURNED AWAY AND WALKED BACK TO THE TRAIN. THE CREATURES HAD ALREADY SET ABOUT THEIR SUPPER.
SERVE US?
HE WAS STILL HOLDING IT. THE BUTCHER'S SYMBOL OF OFFICE.

IT WAS A THIN REFLECTION, BUT KAUFMAN COULD SEE QUITE WELL ENOUGH HOW CHANGED HE WAS. WHITER THAN ANY LIVING MAN SHOULD BE, COVERED IN GRIME AND BLOOD.
SERVE.
SERVE...
KAUFMAN HAD NO WILL LEFT TO REPEL THE ATTACK. TOO LATE HE REALIZED THE INTENTION OF THE FINGERS--
URRRRRK
...IN SILENCE.
HOME.
THE TRAIN BEGAN TO MOVE.
KAUFMAN LAY ON THE FLOOR, TEARS POURING DOWN HIS FACE, TEARS OF DISCOMFITURE AND RESIGNATION. HE WOULD BLEED TO DEATH, HE DECIDED, WHERE HE LAY. IT WOULDN'T MATTER IF HE DIED. IT WAS A FOUL WORLD ANYWAY.

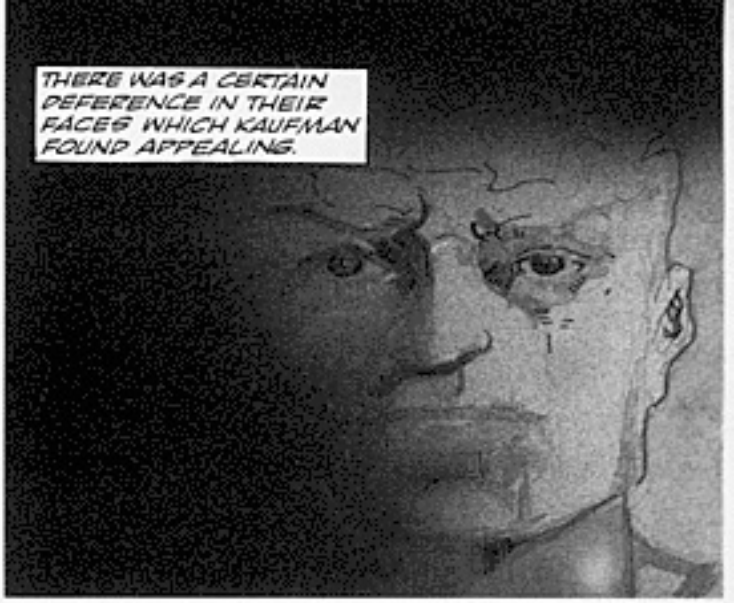
TIME PASSED. HE WASN'T DEAD.
KAUFMAN TRIED TO SAY SOMETHING, BUT HIS MOUTH WAS SEALED UP WITH DRIED BLOOD. HE JERKED HIS HEAD AROUND LIKE A DRIVELLER TRYING TO SPIT OUT A WORD. NOTHING CAME BUT GRUNTS.

YOU GOT A JOB TO DO, MY MAN. THEY'RE VERY PLEASED WITH YOU.

LOTS TO LEARN BEFORE TOMORROW NIGHT.
LOTS TO LEARN. LOTS TO LEARN.


THEY WERE IN NO STATION HE HAD EVER SEEN BEFORE-- A STATION-KEEPER'S NIRVANA. NO GRAFFITI, NO TOKEN-BOOTHS, NO GATES, NO PASSENGERS.
THIS WAS A LINE THAT PROVIDED ONLY ONE SERVICE: THE MIDNIGHT MEAT TRAIN.
A RAIN OF DAWN LIGHT WAS POURING THROUGH A GRATING IN THE ROOF OF THE STATION. MOTES OF DUST HUNG IN THE BEAMS, TURNING OVER AND OVER. KAUFMAN WATCHED THEM, ENTRANCED: HE HADN'T SEEN SUCH A BEAUTIFUL THING SINCE HE WAS A CHILD. LOVELY DUST. OVER AND OVER, AND OVER AND OVER.

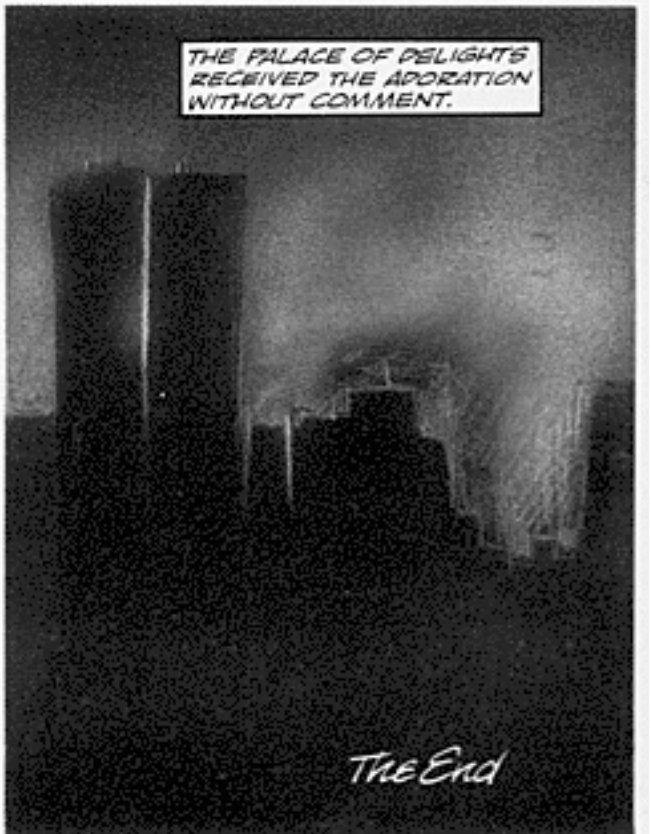
I'D LIKE TO INTRODUCE MAHOGANY'S REPLACEMENT. OUR NEW BUTCHER.

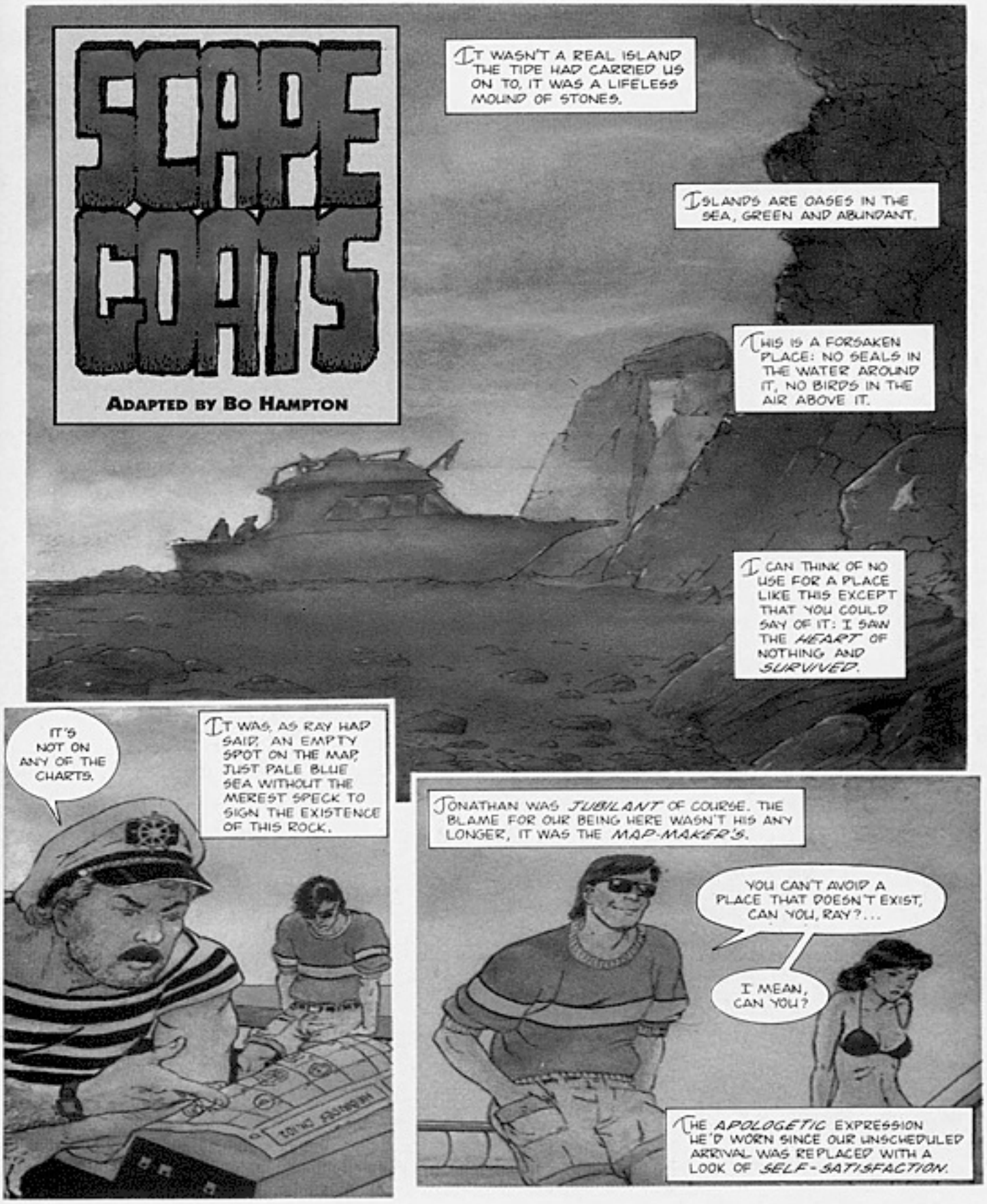

THERE WAS A CERTAIN DEFERENCE IN THEIR FACES WHICH KAUFMAN FOUND APPEALING.

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL DAY. THE BRIGHT SKY OVER NEW YORK WAS STREAKED WITH FILAMENTS OF PALE PINK CLOUD, AND THE AIR SMELT OF MORNING.
THE STREETS AND AVENUES WERE PRACTICALLY EMPTY. AT A DISTANCE AN OCCASIONAL CAB CROSSED AN INTERSECTION, ITS ENGINE A WHISPER; A RUNNER SWEATED PAST ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STREET.

VERY SOON THESE SAME DESERTED SIDEWALKS WOULD BE THRONGED WITH PEOPLE. THE CITY WOULD GO ABOUT ITS BUSINESS IN IGNORANCE: NEVER KNOWING WHAT IT WAS BUILT UPON, OR WHAT IT OWED ITS LIFE TO.

WITHOUT HESITATION, KAUFMAN FELL TO HIS KNEES AND KISSED THE DIRTY CONCRETE WITH HIS BLOODY LIPS, SILENTLY SWEARING HIS ETERNAL LOYALTY TO ITS CONTINUANCE.


THE PALACE OF DELIGHTS RECEIVED THE ADORATION WITHOUT COMMENT.
The End


SCAPE GOATS
ADAPTED BY BO HAMPTON
IT WASN'T A REAL ISLAND THE TIDE HAD CARRIED US ON TO, IT WAS A LIFELESS MOUND OF STONES.
ISLANDS ARE OASES IN THE SEA, GREEN AND ABUNDANT.
THIS IS A FORSAKEN PLACE: NO SEALS IN THE WATER AROUND IT, NO BIRDS IN THE AIR ABOVE IT.
I CAN THINK OF NO USE FOR A PLACE LIKE THIS EXCEPT THAT YOU COULD SAY OF IT: I SAW THE HEART OF NOTHING AND SURVIVED.
IT'S NOT ON ANY OF THE CHARTS.
IT WAS, AS RAY HAD SAID, AN EMPTY SPOT ON THE MAP, JUST PALE BLUE SEA WITHOUT THE MEREST SPECK TO SIGN THE EXISTENCE OF THIS ROCK.
JONATHAN WAS JUBILANT OF COURSE. THE BLAME FOR OUR BEING HERE WASN'T HIS ANY LONGER, IT WAS THE MAP-MAKER'S.
YOU CAN'T AVOID A PLACE THAT DOESN'T EXIST, CAN YOU, RAY?...
I MEAN, CAN YOU?
THE APOLOGETIC EXPRESSION HE'D WORN SINCE OUR UNSCHEDULED ARRIVAL WAS REPLACED WITH A LOOK OF SELF-SATISFACTION.

I'D BEEN IN THE GALLEY PREPARING BREAKFAST...
...WHICH HAD BECOME MY RESPONSIBILITY SINCE NEITHER ANGELA NOR JONATHAN SHOWED ANY ENTHUSIASM FOR THE TASK...
...WHEN THE HULL OF THE "EMMANUELLE" GRATED ON SHINGLE, THEN PLOUGHED HER WAY, JUDDERING, UP ON TO THE STONY BEACH.
THERE WAS A MOMENT OF SILENCE; THEN THE SHOUTING BEGAN.
I CLIMBED UP OUT OF THE GALLEY TO FIND JONATHAN STANDING ON DECK, GRINNING SHEEPISHLY AND WAVING HIS ARMS AROUND TO SEMAPHORE HIS INNOCENCE.
BEFORE YOU ASK... I DON'T KNOW HOW IT HAPPENED! ONE MINUTE WE WERE JUST COASTING ALONG—
RAY WAS CLAMBERING OUT OF THE CABIN AND LOOKING MUCH THE WORSE FOR A NIGHT IN A BUNK WITH ANGELA...
OH, JESUS CHRIST ALL-FUCKING MIGHTY!
BEFORE YOU ASK—
IT WAS SO SUDDEN RAYMOND...
...I MEAN IN THIS MIST...
SHUT THE HELL UP!
IT GAVE ME NO SMALL SATISFACTION TO HEAR JONATHAN SLANGED; I EVEN HOPED RAY WOULD LOSE HIS COOL ENOUGH TO BLOODY THAT PERFECT NOSE.

It was barely two hours after dawn, and the mist that had shrouded this island from Jonathan's view still covered the sun.
If today was anything like the week that we'd had so far, by noon the deck would be too hot to step on barefoot...
...but this morning the chill drove me back below to find a sweater.
There was no wind: the cold was coming up out of the sea...
...it's still *night* down there...
...just a few yards off the beach...
...limitless night.
Back on deck, the maps were out, and Ray was bending over them.
Jonathan glanced at me, trying a smile...
He had this illusion, poor Jonathan, that his face could charm a tortoise out of its shell.
I'd always thought his Jewish good looks too bland to be beautiful...
My indifference was a *red rag* to him.
A voice, sleepy and pouting, drifted up from below deck. *Our Lady of the Bunk* was awake at last...
What's happening, Ray? Where are we?
We've got a bloody *awful* navigator, that's all!
I don't even *know* what happened, Angela!

IS IT AN ISLAND?
OF COURSE, IT'S AN ISLAND. I JUST DON'T KNOW WHICH ONE YET.
I DON'T THINK WE'RE HOLED...
...BUT I CAN'T BE SURE.
WE'LL FLOAT OFF COME HIGH TIDE.
NO SWEAT...
...NO SWEAT AT ALL.
WILL WE SHIT FLOAT OFF? TAKE A LOOK FOR YOURSELF!
THEN WE'LL GET SOME HELP TO HAUL US OFF!
AND YOU CAN DAMN WELL FETCH SOMEONE, YOU ASSHOLE!
SURE, WHY NOT? GIVE IT AN HOUR OR SO FOR THE FOG TO SHIFT AND I'LL TAKE A WALK, FIND SOME HELP!
I'LL PUT ON SOME COFFEE.
KNOWING HER, THAT'D TAKE AN HOUR TO BREW. THERE WAS TIME FOR A STROLL.
DON'T GO TOO FAR, LOVE!
NO.
LOVE, HE SAID. EASY WORD.
HE MEANT NOTHING BY IT.
EMMANUELLE

THE SUN STILL WASN'T GETTING THROUGH THE MIST PROPERLY. IT WAS FILTERING DOWN ON THE ISLAND FITFULLY AND ITS LIGHT FLATTENED EVERYTHING OUT...
...DRAINING THE PLACE OF COLOR OR WEIGHT, REDUCING THE SEA AND THE ROCKS AND THE RUBBISH ON THE BEACH TO ONE BLEACHED-OUT GREY. THE COLOR OF OVER-BOILED MEAT.

AFTER ONLY A HUNDRED YARDS SOMETHING ABOUT THE PLACE BEGAN TO DEPRESS ME, SO I TURNED BACK. ON MY LEFT LISPING WAVES CREPT UP TO THE SHORE AND COLLAPSED WITH A WEARY SLOPPING SOUND ON THE STONES.
NO MAJESTIC ROLLERS HERE: JUST THE RHYTHMICAL SLOP, SLOP, SLOP OF AN EXHAUSTED TIDE.
I HATED THE PLACE ALREADY.

BACK AT THE BOAT, RAY WAS TRYING THE RADIO, BUT FOR SOME REASON ALL HE COULD GET WAS A BLANKET OF WHITE NOISE ON EVERY FREQUENCY.
DAMN THIS PIECE OF SHIT!!

FUNNY, ISN'T IT—
HILARIOUS.
—THERE'S NO FOG HORNS. MIST BUT NO HORNS. NOT EVEN THE SOUND OF A MOTOR...WEIRD.

HE WAS RIGHT. TOTAL SILENCE WRAPPED US UP, A DAMP AND SMOTHERING HUSH...
EXCEPT FOR THE APOLOGETIC SLOP OF THE WAVES AND THE SOUND OF OUR VOICES, WE MIGHT AS WELL HAVE BEEN DEAF.

I WENT BELOW TO DO THE WASHING UP. JONATHAN JOINED ME, OBVIOUSLY STILL FEELING A LITTLE FOOLISH DESPITE THE BRAVADO.
ALL HE WANTED WAS TO BE TOLD I DIDN'T THINK THIS WAS HIS FAULT...
... AND YES, OF COURSE HE WAS A KOSHER ADONIS. I SAID NOTHING.
DO YOU MIND IF I LEND A HAND?
THERE'S REALLY NOT ROOM FOR TWO...
WHY DON'T YOU TAKE IN SOME SUN BEFORE IT GETS TOO HOT?
I FEEL LIKE A SHIT.
IT WAS AN ACCIDENT.
AN UTTER SHIT.
I SAID THERE WASN'T ANY ROOM, JONATHAN.
PROXIMITY MADE ME FEEL ALMOST CLAUSTROPHOBIC. HIS BODY WAS TOO LARGE FOR THE SPACE: TOO TANNED, TOO ASSERTIVE.
I WANTED TO TELL HIM TO LEAVE ME ALONE...
I MOVED OUT OF THE DOORWAY AND DOWN INTO THE GALLEY.
BUT THE LASSITUDE OF THE PLACE SEEMED TO HAVE GOT INTO MY SYSTEM...
BEHIND HIM, THE STAIR CREAKED...
... AND I LOOKED OVER HIS SHOULDER IN TIME TO GLIMPSE RAY STARING DOWN AT JONATHAN'S BUTTOCKS AND AT THE TANGLE OF OUR ARMS.
DID HE SEE, I WONDERED, THAT I FELT NOTHING...
...DID HE UNDERSTAND THAT I DID THIS DISPASSIONATELY, AND COULD ONLY HAVE FELT A TWINGE OF DESIRE IF I SUBSTITUTED HIS HEAD, HIS BACK, HIS COCK FOR JONATHAN'S?

JONATHAN WAS STILL WORKING AT ME WITH DELIBERATE BUT UNINSPIRED STROKES...

...A FROWN ON HIS FACE LIKE THAT OF A SCHOOLBOY TRYING TO SOLVE SOME IMPOSSIBLE EQUATION.

SOUNDLESSLY RAY WITHDREW FROM THE STAIRWAY AND A MOMENT PASSED IN WHICH JONATHAN SAID HE LOVED ME.

DISCHARGE CAME WITHOUT WARNING, SIGNALLED ONLY BY A TIGHTENING OF HIS HOLD ON MY SHOULDERS...

...AND A DEEPENING OF HIS FROWN.

HIS EYES FOUND MINE FOR A FLUSTERED MOMENT.

I WANTED TO KISS HIM BUT HE'D LOST ALL INTEREST.

WAS IT GOOD FOR YOU?

I NODDED. IT WAS LAUGHABLE: THE WHOLE THING WAS LAUGHABLE...

STUCK IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE WITH THIS LITTLE BOY OF TWENTY SIX, AND ANGELA, AND A MAN WHO DIDN'T CARE IF I LIVED OR DIED.

BUT THEN PERHAPS NEITHER DID I.

I CHANGED AND FOLLOWED HIM UP ON DECK...

I THINK IT'S LIFTED A BIT.

HAS IT?

WHERE ARE THE OTHERS?

EXPLORING.

I STILL FEEL LIKE A SHIT.

BIT EARLY FOR DRINKING ISN'T IT?

WANT SOME?

IT'S NOT EVEN ELEVEN!

Seagram's 7

WHO CARES?

FOLLOW MY FINGER...
NO, YOU'RE NOT LOOKING AT THE RIGHT PLACE. FOLLOW MY FINGER—SEE IT?
NOTHING.
AT THE EDGE OF THE MIST, IT APPEARS AND DISAPPEARS. THERE! AGAIN!!
I DID SEE SOMETHING IN THE WATER... BROWN COLORED, WRINKLED, TURNING OVER.
IT'S A SEAL.
I DON'T THINK SO.
THE SUN'S WARMING UP THE SEA. THEY'RE PROBABLY COMING IN TO BASK IN THE SHALLOWS.
IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE A SEAL...
IT... ROLLS IN A FUNNY WAY.
LEAVE SOME FOR TONIGHT.
YES, MOTHER.
KINGELA'S VOICE. "YOU GUYS" SHE CALLED US.
HEY, YOU GUYS! COME AND SEE!
SHE WANTS US TO COME AND SEE.
I HEARD.
I DIDN'T WANT TO MOVE, BUT HE HAULED ME UP BY THE ARM.
IT WASN'T WORTH ARGUING. HIS BREATH WAS INFLAMMABLE.
IT WAS DIFFICULT MAKING OUR WAY UP THE BEACH. THE STONES WERE NOT WET WITH SEA WATER...
... BUT COVERED IN A SLICK FILM OF GREY-GREEN ALGAE LIKE SWEAT ON A SKULL.

EVERY FEW YARDS WE'D HAVE TO NEGOTIATE A LINE OF STINKING SEAWEED.
IT WASN'T JUST KELP; THERE WAS THE USUAL DETRITUS WASHED UP ON ANY BEACHES...
...THE BROKEN BOTTLES, THE RUSTING COKE CANS, GLOBS OF TAR, FRAGMENTS OF CRABS.
Coke
AND CRAWLING OVER THESE STINKING PILES OF DROSS WERE INCH-LONG, FAT-EYED BLUE FLIES...
Coke
HUNDREDS OF THEM, BUZZING TO BE ALIVE AND ALIVE TO BE BUZZING.
IT WAS THE FIRST LIFE WE'D SEEN.
I WAS DOING MY BEST NOT TO FALL FLAT ON MY FACE AS I STEPPED ACROSS ONE OF THESE LINES OF SEAWEED, WHEN A LITTLE AVALANCHE OF PEBBLES BEGAN OFF TO MY LEFT...
THERE WAS NO VISIBLE CAUSE FOR THE EFFECT.
THE AVALANCHE STOPPED: RUN OUT OF ENERGY. THEN ANOTHER: THIS TIME BETWEEN US AND THE SEA...
SKIPPING STONES: BIGGER THIS TIME THAN THE LAST, AND GAINING MORE HEIGHT AS THEY LEAPT. PLOP. DEAD NOISE. PLOP. PLOP.
THEN RAY APPEARED FROM BEHIND ONE OF THE BIG BOULDERS AT THE HEIGHT OF THE BEACH, BEAMING LIKE A LOON.
THERE'S LIFE ON MARS!
A FEW MORE PERILOUS MOMENTS AND WE REACHED HIM...
WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?
LOOK WHAT WE'VE FOUND!
THE FIRST SHOCK.
ONCE WE GOT TO THE HEIGHT OF THE BEACH, WE WERE LOOKING DOWN ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ISLAND.
NO INHABITANTS, NO BOATS, NO SIGN OF HUMAN EXISTENCE...
...THE WHOLE PLACE COULDN'T HAVE BEEN MORE THAN HALF A MILE ACROSS: BARELY THE BACK OF A WHALE...

BUT THERE WAS SOME LIFE HERE. THAT WAS THE SECOND SHOCK.
IN THE SHELTERING RING OF THE LARGE, BALD BOULDERS, WHICH CROWNED THE ISLAND WAS A FENCED-IN COMPOUND.
INSIDE THE PEN THERE WAS A PATCH OF COARSE GRASS, AND ON THIS PITIFUL LAWN STOOD THREE SHEEP.
AND ANGELA.
SHEEP!
SO WHAT?
WELL, IT'S STRANGE, ISN'T IT? THREE SHEEP IN THE MIDDLE OF A LITTLE PLACE LIKE THIS?
IT'S CRUEL!
I HAD TO AGREE: IT SEEMED POSITIVELY SADISTIC, LOCKING UP THESE CREATURES WITHOUT MORE THAN A FEW BLADES OF GRASS TO CHEW ON, AND A BATTERED TIN BATH OF STAGNANT WATER TO QUENCH THEIR THIRST.
I'VE CUT MY FOOT.
THERE'S GLASS ON THE BEACH.
THEY'RE SO DEADPAN, NATURE'S STRAIGHT MEN.
CURIOUSLY, THEY DIDN'T LOOK SO UNHAPPY WITH THEIR CONDITION; THEIR STARES WERE PHILOSOPHICAL.
JUST THREE GREY SHEEP WAITING TO DIE.
RAY HAD LOST INTEREST IN THE BUSINESS. HE WAS WANDERING BACK DOWN THE BEACH, KICKING A CAN AHEAD OF HIM...
IT REMINDED ME OF THE STONES.
WE SHOULD LET THEM FREE...
I IGNORED HER. WHAT WAS FREEDOM IN A PLACE LIKE THIS?

DON'T YOU THINK WE SHOULD?
NO.
THEY'LL DIE!
SOMEBODY PUT THEM HERE FOR A REASON!
BUT THEY'LL DIE!
THEY'LL DIE ON THE BEACH IF WE LET THEM OUT. THERE'S NO FOOD FOR THEM.
WE'LL FEED THEM.
FRENCH TOAST AND GIN.
WE CAN'T JUST LEAVE THEM!
IT'S NOT OUR BUSINESS.
IT WAS ALL GETTING BORING. THREE SHEEP. WHO CARED IF THEY LIVED OR—
I'D THOUGHT THAT ABOUT MYSELF AN HOUR EARLIER.
WE HAD SOMETHING IN COMMON, THE SHEEP AND I.
THEY'LL DIE!
YOU'RE A STUPID BITCH.
THE REMARK WAS MADE WITHOUT MALICE. HE SAID IT CALMLY, AS A STATEMENT OF PLAIN FACT.
WHAT?
STUPID BITCH. B-I-T-C-H!
STUNG BY HIS WORDS, ANGELA MADE THE INEVITABLE ACCUSATION.
YOU GOT US STUCK HERE.
I DID IT DELIBERATELY. I WANTED TO SEE IF WE COULD LEAVE YOU HERE.

YOU'RE DRUNK.
AND YOU'RE STUPID...
...BUT I'LL BE SOBER IN THE MORNING.
THE OLD LINES STILL MADE THEIR MARK. SHE WAS, WHEN IT CAME DOWN TO VERBAL FISTICUFFS, EASY MEAT.
I ALMOST FELT SOME SYMPATHY FOR HER.
YOU'RE A BASTARD WHEN YOU WANT TO BE.
BETTER BE FRIENDS THEN I WON'T BE A BASTARD TO YOU.
YOU DON'T SCARE ME.
I KNOW.
THE MUTTON WAS STARING AT ME AGAIN. I STARED BACK.
FUCKING SHEEP.
THEY CAN'T HELP IT.
IF THEY HAD ANY DECENCY THEY'D SLIT THEIR UGLY FUCKING THROATS
I'M GOING BACK TO THE BOAT.
UGLY FUCKERS!
COMING?
DON'T GO. STAY. THEY WON'T INTERRUPT US THIS TIME.
YOU KNEW?
YOU MEAN ABOUT RAY? OF COURSE I KNEW. I THOUGHT WE PUT ON QUITE A PERFORMANCE.
THE SMELL OF HIM BROUGHT BACK THE GALLEY, HIS FROWN, HIS MUTTERED PROFESSION ("LOVE YOU"), THE QUIET RETREAT.
DEJA VU.
STILL, WHAT WAS THERE TO DO ON A DAY LIKE THIS BUT GO ROUND IN THE SAME DREARY CIRCLE, LIKE THE SHEEP IN THE PEN? ROUND AND ROUND...

THE GIN HAD GONE TO HIS GROIN. HE TRIED HIS BEST, BUT IT WAS LIKE TRYING TO THREAD SPAGHETTI.
FUCK. FUCK. FUCK.
SENSELESS WORD, ONCE IT WAS REPEATED, IT HAD LOST ALL ITS MEANING, LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE. SIGNIFYING NOTHING.
IT DOESN'T MATTER.
FUCK OFF.
HE DIDN'T LOOK AT ME . . .
. . . HE JUST STARED DOWN AT HIS COCK. IF HE'D HAD A KNIFE AT THAT MOMENT I THINK HE'D HAVE CUT IT OFF AND LAID IT ON THE WARM ROCK . . .
. . . A SHRINE TO STERILITY.
I LEFT HIM STUDYING HIMSELF AND STARTED BACK TO THE "EMMANUELLE."
SOMETHING STRUCK ME AS I WENT. THE BLUE FLIES, INSTEAD OF JUMPING AHEAD OF ME AS I APPROACHED, JUST LET THEMSELVES BE TRODDEN ON . . .
POSITIVELY LETHARGIC, OR SUICIDAL.
AS THE AIR WARMED UP THE ISLAND UNVEILED ITS NEXT DISGUSTING TRICK: THE SMELL.
THE FRAGRANCE WAS AS WHOLESOME AS A ROOM FULL OF ROTTING PEACHES, THICK AND SICKLY . . .
. . . AND UNDER THE SWEETNESS, SOMETHING ELSE RATHER LESS PLEASANT THAN PEACHES, FRESH OR ROTTEN.
A SMELL LIKE AN OPEN DRAIN CLOGGED WITH OLD MEAT . . .
. . . LIKE THE GUTTERS OF A SLAUGHTERHOUSE, CAKED WITH SUET AND BLACK BLOOD.
I WAS HALFWAY BACK TO THE "EMMANUELLE," WHEN I HEARD THE NOISE OF A LITTLE MURDER BEHIND ME.
JONATHAN'S WHOOPS OF SATANIC GLEE ALMOST DROWNED THE PATHETIC VOICE OF THE SHEEP AS IT WAS KILLED . . .
. . . BUT I KNEW INSTINCTIVELY WHAT THE DRUNKEN BASTARD HAD DONE.
I KNEW WHAT I'D SEE BEFORE IT CAME INTO SIGHT.

THE GREY-GREEN LAWN HAD TURNED RED...
JONATHAN, ERECT NOW, GRINNED UNDER THE BLOOD. OH, THAT GRIN: IT SERVED SO MANY PURPOSES.
WASN'T THAT THE SAME SMILE HE CHARMED WOMEN WITH? THE SAME GRIN THAT SPOKE LECHERY AND LOVE?
NOW AT LAST IT WAS PUT TO ITS TRUE PURPOSE! THE GAWPING SMILE OF THE SATISFIED SAVAGE...
THEN, SLOWLY, THE SMILE DECAYED...
JESUS.
...AS HIS SENSES RETURNED.
A THROB OF NAUSEA THREW HIS HEAD FORWARD, PITCHING HALF-DIGESTED GIN AND TOAST OVER THE GRASS.
I DIDN'T WANT TO COMFORT HIM—HE WAS SIMPLY BEYOND MY HELP.
FRANKIE!
HORRIBLE ISLAND. VILE, STINKING, INSANE ISLAND.

THE SMELL WAS STRONGER NOW: COMING UP OUT OF THE GROUND IN FILTHY WAVES. ALL I THOUGHT WAS HATE AS I STUMBLED ACROSS THE WEED AND FILTH...
...THEN A LITTLE PATTERING OF PEBBLES LIKE BEFORE.
AS THEY ROLLED TO A HALT, A LARGER PEBBLE, FULLY SIX INCHES ACROSS, SEEMED TO MOVE SPONTANEOUSLY FROM ITS RESTING PLACE, AND ROLL DOWN THE BEACH.
WAS THERE SOME SORT OF ANIMAL - A CRAB MAYBE - UNDER THE BEACH, MOVING THE STONES? OR WAS IT THE HEAT THAT IN SOME WAY TWITCHED THEM INTO LIFE?
AGAIN: A BIGGER STONE - I WALKED ON, WHILE BEHIND THE RATTLE AND PATTER CONTINUED, ONE LITTLE SEQUENCE COMING CLOSE UPON ANOTHER TO MAKE AN ALMOST SEAMLESS PERCUSSION.
I BEGAN, WITHOUT REAL FOCUS OR EXPLANATION, TO BE AFRAID.
OH, GOD... I'VE FOUND OUT WHERE WE ARE...
GOOD?
NO, NOT GOOD!
WHY, RAY? WHAT'S WRONG?
IT'S NOT JUST AN ISLAND... IT'S A BURIAL MOUND. WAR DEAD, IT SAYS HERE.
CAN IT BE THERE ARE CORPSES UNDER THOSE STONES? BURIED FACE UP TO THE SUN LIKE HOLIDAY MAKERS LAID OUT ON A BLACKPOOL BEACH?
WORLD WAR I, WORLD WAR II SOLDIERS FROM TORPEDOED TROOPSHIPS, SAILORS WASHED UP BROUGHT DOWN HERE BY THE GULF STREAM...
... APPARENTLY THE CURRENT FUNNELS THEM THROUGH THE STRAITS AND WASHES THEM UP ON THE BEACHES OF THE ISLANDS AROUND HERE.
NOT ANY LONGER THOUGH.
I'M SURE THE OCCASIONAL FISHERMAN GETS BURIED HERE STILL.
...WHAT ELSE COULD IT BE, THIS GODFORSAKEN MOUND - BUT A CEMETARY? I LOOKED AT THE ISLAND WITH NEW EYES, AS THOUGH I JUST RECOGNIZED IT FOR WHAT IT WAS. NOW I HAD A REASON TO DESPISE ITS HUMPY BACK, ITS SORDID BEACH, THE SMELL OF PEACHES.
I LOOKED AWAY FROM RAY ALONG THE BEACH. JONATHAN WAS WASHING - SPLASHING WATER UP ON TO HIS CHEST.

HIS HAND SHADED HIS EYES AND I FOLLOWED HIS GAZE AS I HAD FOLLOWED HIS FINGER.
A HUNDRED YARDS OUT THAT SEAL, OR WHALE, OR WHATEVER IT WAS, HAD RETURNED ...LOLLING IN THE WATER.
SOMETIMES, AS IT TURNED, IT THREW UP A FIN, LIKE A SWIMMER'S ARM, BECKONING.
HOW MANY PEOPLE WERE BURIED?
IT JUST SAYS "MANY DEAD."
AND DO THEY PUT THEM IN COFFINS?
HOW SHOULD I KNOW?
WHAT HORRIBLE DEATHS, I THOUGHT, AND WORSE, WHAT JOURNEYS AFTER DEATH...
...IN SQUADS OF FELLOW CORPSES, ALONG THE GULF STREAM TO THIS BLEAK LANDFALL.
I SAW THEM IN MY MIND'S EYE, SUBJECT TO EVERY WHIM OF THE TIDE, BORNE BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS IN A SLUSH OF ROLLERS...
...UNTIL A CASUAL LIMB SNAGGED ON A ROCK AND THE SEA LOST POSSESSION OF THEM.

I HAD A SUDDEN, MORBID DESIRE TO WALK ON THE BEACH AGAIN...
...ARMED WITH THIS KNOWLEDGE, KICKING OVER THE PEBBLES IN HOPES OF TURNING UP A BONE OR TWO.
WHERE ARE YOU OFF TO?
JONATHAN.
THE STENCH WAS CLEARER NOW; THAT WAS THE ACCRUED ODOR OF THE DEAD...
JONATHAN WAS NOT TO BE SEEN. I CALLED HIS NAME...
MY VOICE SEEMED TO EXCITE THE FLIES. THEY ROSE IN SEETHING CLOUDS. JONATHAN DIDN'T REPLY.
I REALIZED I HADN'T TOLD ANGELA AND RAY ABOUT THE DEAD SHEEP.
MAYBE THAT WAS A SECRET BETWEEN US FOUR: JONATHAN, MYSELF, AND THE TWO SURVIVORS IN THE PEN.
THEN I SAW HIM A FEW YARDS AHEAD, HIS CHEST WHITE, WIDE AND CLEAN. EVERY SPECK OF BLOOD WASHED OFF.
A SECRET IT IS THEN...
WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?
WALKING IT OFF. TOO MUCH GIN.
I RETURNED THE SMILE, SPONTANEOUSLY; HE'D SAID HE LOVED ME IN THE GALLEY...
...THAT COUNTED FOR SOMETHING.

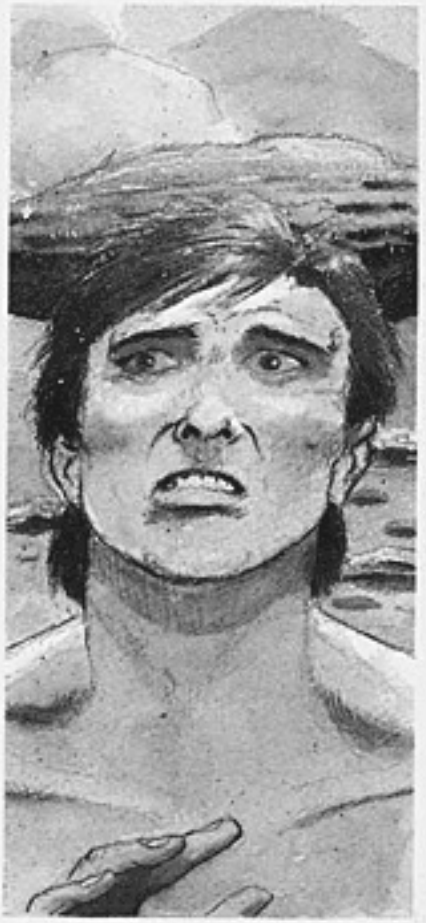
BEHIND HIM A RATTLE OF SKIPPING STONES...

...THE RATTLE OF STONES SUDDENLY SEEMED RHYTHMICAL. NO LONGER A RANDOM SERIES OF NOTES...

...IT WAS A BEAT, A TICK-TAP PULSE...

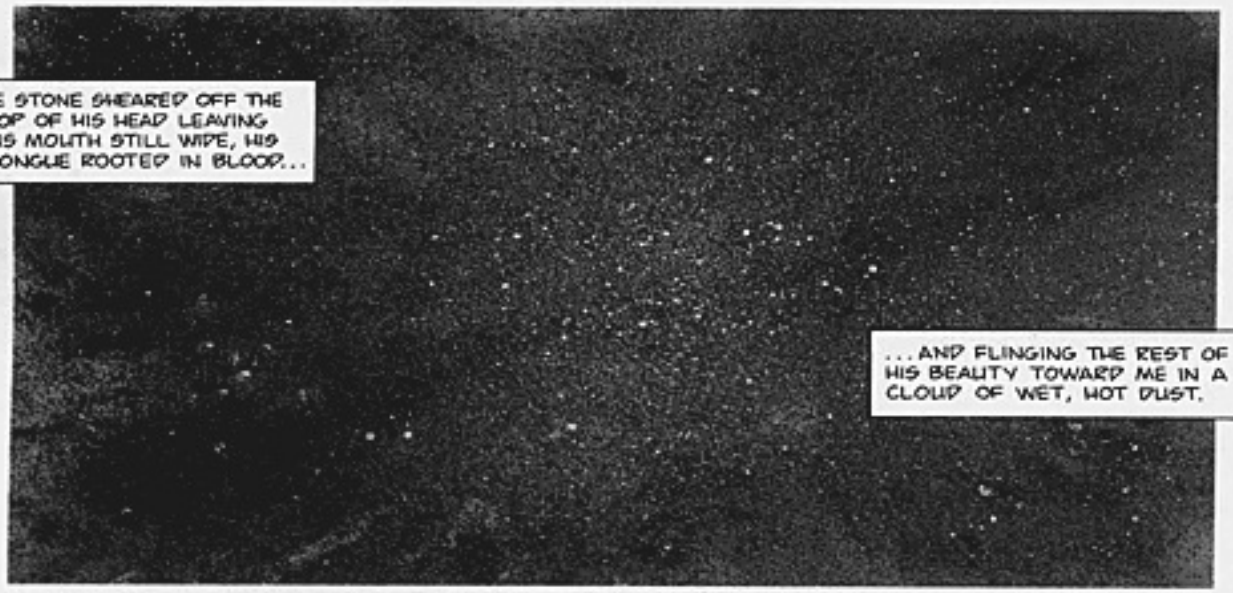
...NO ACCIDENT... *INTENTION.*

JONATHAN'S SKIN WAS ALMOST LUMINOUS WITH SUN ON IT, THROWN INTO RELIEF BY THE *DARKNESS* BEHIND HIM...



WAIT.

WHAT DARKNESS?

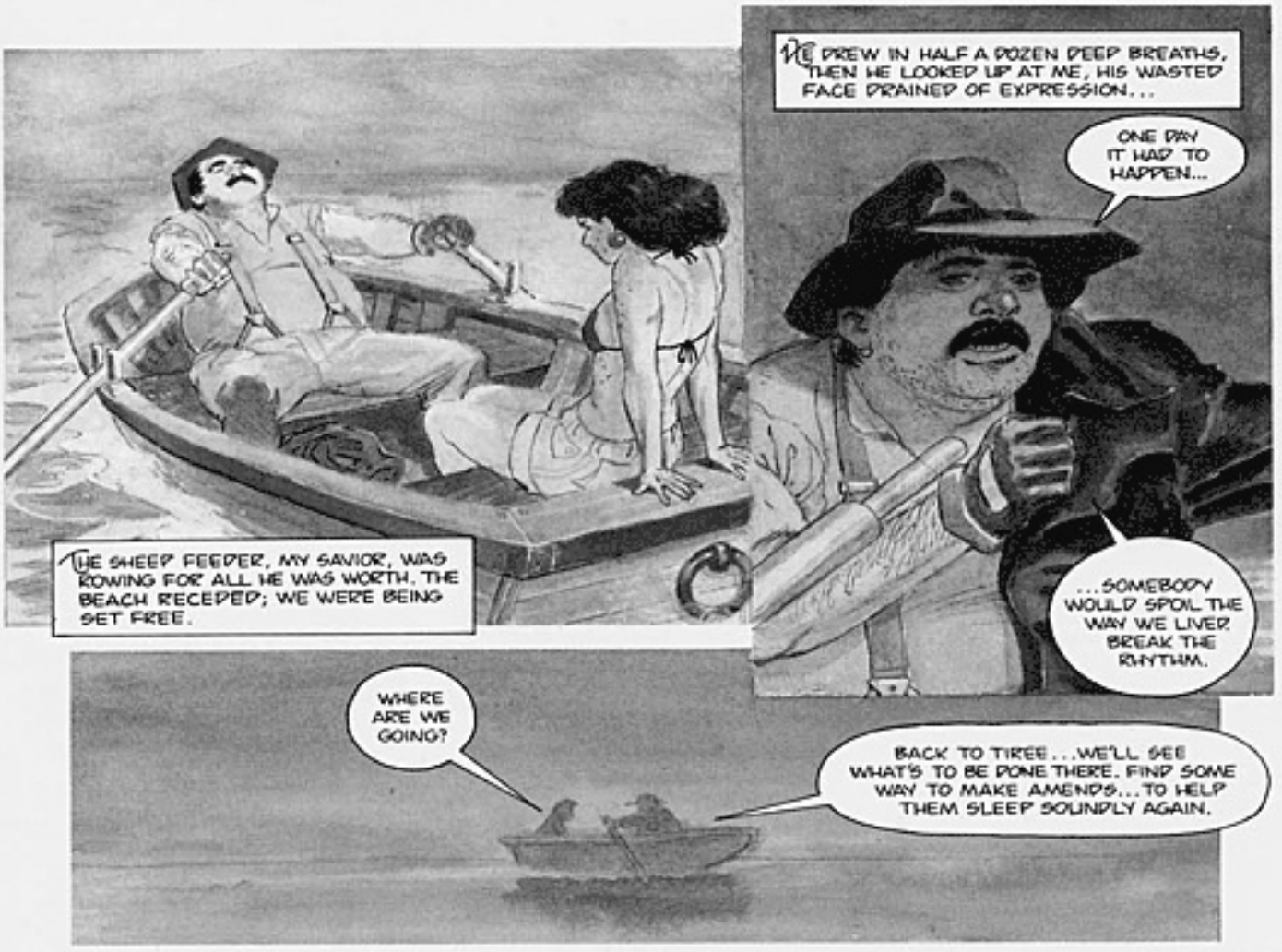

THE STONE SHEARED OFF THE TOP OF HIS HEAD LEAVING HIS MOUTH STILL WIDE, HIS TONGUE ROOTED IN BLOOD...
...AND FLINGING THE REST OF HIS BEAUTY TOWARD ME IN A CLOUD OF WET, HOT DUST.

THE UPPER PART OF HIS HEAD WAS SPLIT ON TO THE FACE OF THE STONE...
...ITS EXPRESSION INTACT AS IT SWOOPED TOWARDS ME...
I HALF FELL AND IT SCREAMED PAST ME, VEERING OFF OUT TO SEA...
...ONCE OVER THE WATER THE ASSASSIN SEEMED TO LOSE ITS WILL SOMEHOW...
...AND FALTERED IN THE AIR BEFORE PLUNGING INTO THE WAVES.
I WAS STILL NOT SCREAMING...
THOUGH FOR SANITY'S SAKE I HAD TO UNLEASH THE TERROR SUFFOCATING ME.
SOMEBODY MUST HEAR ME, HOLD ME, TAKE ME AWAY AND EXPLAIN TO ME BEFORE THE SKIPPING PEBBLES FOUND THEIR RHYTHM AGAIN...
...OR WORSE, BEFORE THE MINDS BELOW THE BEACH, UNSATISFIED WITH MURDER BY PROXY, ROLLED AWAY THEIR GRAVE STONES AND ROSE TO KISS ME THEMSELVES...

BUT THE SCREAM WOULD NOT COME. ALL I COULD HEAR WAS THE PATTER OF STONES TO MY RIGHT AND LEFT.
THEY INTEND TO KILL US ALL FOR INVADING THEIR SACRED GROUND... STONED TO DEATH, LIKE HERETICS... THEN A VOICE...
FOR CHRIST'S SAKE—
A MAN'S VOICE; BUT NOT RAY'S...
...HE SEEMED TO HAVE APPEARED FROM OUT OF THIN AIR... IN ONE HAND A BUCKET AND UNDER HIS ARM A BUNDLE OF COARSELY CUT HAY...
...FOOD FOR SHEEP.
IN THE NAME OF CHRIST WHAT'S GONE ON??
MAYBE I POINTED TO THE SHEEP PEN, MAYBE NOT.
WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?
WHATEVER THE REASON, HE SEEMED TO KNOW WHAT I WAS THINKING AND BEGAN TO CLIMB THE BEACH TOWARDS THE CROWN OF THE ISLAND.
HALF BLIND WITH CONFUSION, I FOLLOWED, BUT BEFORE I COULD REACH THE BOULDERS HE WAS OUT OF THEIR SHADOW AGAIN... HIS FACE SUDDENLY SHINING WITH PANIC.
WHO DID THAT?
JONATHAN.
MY CHRIST, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?
KILLING THEIR GIFTS.

JUST SHEEP.
IN MY HEAD THE INSTANT OF JONATHAN'S DECAPITATION WAS PLAYING OVER AND OVER AGAIN. A LOOP OF SLAUGHTER.
THEY DEMAND IT, DON'T YOU SEE, OR THEY RISE...
WHO RISE?
ALL OF THEM. PUT AWAY WITHOUT GRIEF OR MOURNING. BUT THEY'VE GOT THE SEA IN THEM, IN THEIR HEADS...
IT WAS QUITE PLAIN TO ME SUDDENLY. THE DEAD WERE HERE, AS WE KNEW. UNDER THE STONES. BUT THEY HAD THE RHYTHM OF THE SEA IN THEM, AND THEY WOULDN'T LIE DOWN, SO TO PLACATE THEM, THESE SHEEP WERE TETHERED IN A PEN TO BE OFFERED UP TO THEIR WILLS...
IT WASN'T FOOD THEY WANTED, IT WAS THE GESTURE OF RECOGNITION... AS SIMPLE AS THAT.
THEN THE FAMILIAR PATTER BEGAN AGAIN, THE DRUMMING OF STONES WHICH GREW, WITHOUT WARNING, INTO AN EAR-SPLITTING THUNDER...
...UNDER THE CACOPHANY THREE OTHER SOUNDS: SPLASHING, SCREAMING, AND WHOLESALE DESTRUCTION...
THEY WERE AFTER THE "EMMANUELLE" ...AFTER RAY.
I STARTED TO RUN IN THE DIRECTION OF THE BOAT, THE BEACH RIPPLING BENEATH MY FEET.
AGAIN, THE TERRIBLE SCREAMS, WRUNG FROM A BODY THAT WAS BEING BUFFETED AND BROKEN.
WE RAN, THE NOISE OF THE ASSAULT BECAME LOUDER. STONES DANCED IN THE AIR LIKE FAT BIRDS, BLOCKING THE SUN BEFORE PLUNGING DOWN TO STRIKE AT SOME UNSEEN TARGET. MAYBE THE BOAT. MAYBE FLESH ITSELF—

ANGELA'S TORMENTED SCREAMS HAD CEASED...
THE "EMMANUELLE" AND ITS HUMAN CONTENTS WERE BEYOND ALL HOPE OF SALVATION.
I SCREAMED THEN...
THE SHEEP FEEDER WAS DRAGGING ME NOW AND I WAS FOLLOWING HIM BACK OVER THE BEACH...
COME ON!
THE STONES BEAT A TATTOO ON THE REMAINING STRUCTURE OF THE HULL...
...AND THRASHED AT THE LIFELESS BULK OF ANGELA'S BODY, MAKING IT BOB UP AND DOWN AS THOUGH A CURRENT WERE BEING PASSED THROUGH IT. RAY WAS NOWHERE TO BE SEEN.
THE BOAT— WE CAN GET AWAY IN THE BOAT!
THE IDEA OF ESCAPE SEEMED LUDICROUS...
THE ISLAND HAD US ON ITS BACK. WE WERE ITS OBJECTS UTTERLY.
NO WALLS OF STONES ROSE TO PREVENT OUR ESCAPE. NO SLAUGHTERING HAIL. EVEN THE ATTACK ON THE "EMMANUELLE" HAD CEASED.
HAD THEY SATED THEMSELVES ON JUST THREE VICTIMS?


THE SHEEP FEEDER, MY SAVIOR, WAS ROWING FOR ALL HE WAS WORTH. THE BEACH RECEDED; WE WERE BEING SET FREE.
HE DREW IN HALF A DOZEN DEEP BREATHS, THEN HE LOOKED UP AT ME, HIS WASTED FACE DRAINED OF EXPRESSION...
ONE DAY IT HAD TO HAPPEN...
...SOMEBODY WOULD SPOIL THE WAY WE LIVED. BREAK THE RHYTHM.
WHERE ARE WE GOING?
BACK TO TIREE...WE'LL SEE WHAT'S TO BE DONE THERE. FIND SOME WAY TO MAKE AMENDS...TO HELP THEM SLEEP SOUNDLY AGAIN.

DO THEY EAT THE SHEEP?
NO, THEY TAKE THE BEASTS AS A GESTURE OF REMEMBRANCE.
IT'S OUR WAY OF MOURNING THEM.
A BLANK MOMENT PASSED.

THEN THE SCRATCHING...
...A SCRABBLING AT THE UNDERSIDE OF THE BOAT LIKE A MAN'S NAILS TICKLING THE PLANKS TO BE LET IN... NOT ONE MAN... MANY.

IN THE BOAT WE DIDN'T MOVE, WE DIDN'T SPEAK. WE DIDN'T *BELIEVE*.
EVEN AS WE HEARD THE *WORST*—WE DIDN'T *BELIEVE* THE WORST...

SPLASH OFF TO STARBOARD.
I TURNED AND HE WAS COMING TOWARDS ME, RIGID IN THE WATER, BORNE UP BY UNSEEN PUPPETEERS LIKE A FIGUREHEAD...
...IT WAS RAY, STONED TO DEATH, THEN BROUGHT LIKE A GLEEFUL MASCOT, LIKE PROOF OF POWER, TO SPOOK US.
I LOOKED AT HIS FACE: LACERATED AND BROKEN... BRUISES AND CUTS ...ONE EYE ALMOST CLOSED, THE OTHER, SMASHED FROM ITS ORBIT...
TWO YARDS FROM THE BOAT, THE PUPPETEERS LET HIM SINK BACK INTO THE SEA...
...WHERE HE DISAPPEARED IN A SWIRL OF PINK WATER.
YOUR COMPANION?
I NODDED. HE MUST HAVE FALLEN INTO THE SEA FROM THE STERN OF THE "EMMANUELLE." NOW HE WAS LIKE THEM, A DROWNED MAN. THEY'D ALREADY CLAIMED HIM AS THEIR PLAYTHING.
ROW! ROW OR THEY'LL KILL US!
WE SEEMED RESIGNED TO WHATEVER FATE THEY HAD IN MIND FOR US...
WE SHOOK HIS HEAD AND SPAT INTO THE WATER...
BENEATH HIS FLOATING PHLEGM SOMETHING MOVED IN THE DEEP...
PALE FORMS ROLLED AND SOMERSAULTED, TOO FAR DOWN TO BE CLEARLY SEEN.
THEY CAME FLOATING UP TOWARDS US... THEIR SEA-CORRUPTED FACES BETTER DEFINED WITH EVERY FATHOM THEY ROSE.

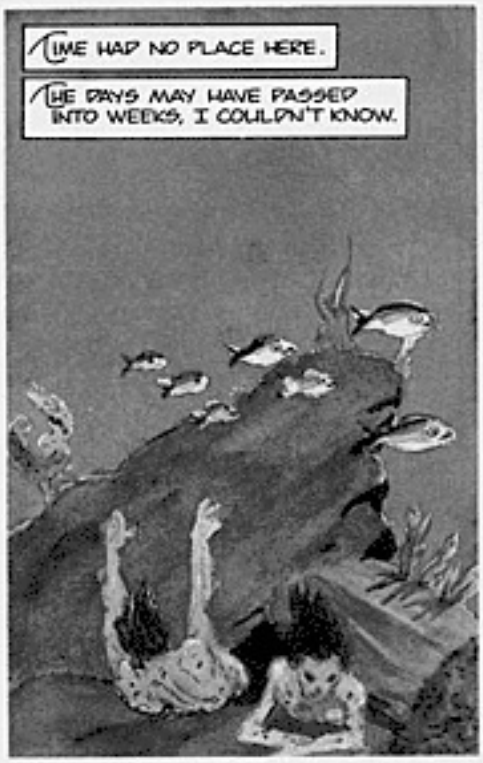
THE LOOK OF RESIGNATION ON THE SHEEPFEEDER'S FACE DIDN'T FALTER FOR A MOMENT...
...AS THE BOAT WAS SHAKEN BACKWARDS AND FORWARDS...
...AT FIRST GENTLY, THEN SO VIOLENTLY WE WERE BEATEN ABOUT LIKE DOLLS.
A MOMENT LATER THE BOAT TIPPED OVER.
I'D ALWAYS BEEN A FAIRLY STRONG SWIMMER... MY STROKES WERE CONFIDENT AS I BEGAN TO SWIM FROM THE BOAT.
THE SHEEPFEEDER WASN'T AS LUCKY...
LIKE MANY MEN WHO LIVE WITH THE SEA, HE APPARENTLY COULDN'T SWIM.
WITHOUT ISSUING A CRY OR A PRAYER, HE SANK LIKE A STONE.
WHATEVER HOPES OF ESCAPE I HAD, THEY WERE SHORT-LIVED. I FELT A SOFT, OH SO VERY SOFT, BRUSHING OF MY ANKLES AND MY FEET, ALMOST A CARESS...

...THE TOUCH ON MY ANKLE BECAME A GRASP. I GULPED WHAT I KNEW TO BE MY LAST BREATH OF AIR...
...AND AS I DID SO...
...RAY'S HEAD BOBBED NO MORE THAN A YARD FROM ME...
...I SAW HIS WOUNDS IN CLINICAL DETAIL.

I SAW MY HARD-EARNED BREATH FLASHING PAST MY FACE IN A DISPLAY OF SILVER BUBBLES...
...RAY WAS BESIDE ME, CONSOLING, ATTENTIVE...
...HIS ARMS FLOATED OVER HIS HEAD AS THOUGH HE WERE SURRENDERING.

BELOW ME, THE CORPSES HUGGED MY LEGS. THEY WANTED ME, OH HOW DEARLY THEY WANTED ME... RAY WAS HOLDING ME, TOO, WRAPPING ME UP...
...PRESSING HIS FACE TO MINE.
THERE WAS NO PURPOSE IN THE GESTURE, I SUPPOSE. HE DIDN'T KNOW OR FEEL OR LOVE OR CARE. AND I, LOSING MY LIFE WITH EVERY SECOND, SUCCUMBING TO THE SEA ABSOLUTELY, COULDN'T TAKE PLEASURE IN THE INTIMACY THAT I'D LONGED FOR...

...TOO LATE FOR LOVE; THE SUNLIGHT WAS ALREADY A MEMORY.
NOW THE GRIP OF MY COMPANIONS RELAXED, AND THE GENTLE TIDE HAD ITS WAY WITH ME. A RAPE OF THE BODY: RAVAGING OF SKIN AND MUSCLE, GUT, EYE, SINUS, TONGUE, BRAIN.


TIME HAD NO PLACE HERE.
THE DAYS MAY HAVE PASSED INTO WEEKS, I COULDN'T KNOW.

MAYBE THE SAME HOUR AS I DIED, OR MAYBE A YEAR LATER, THE CURRENT SNIFFS ME OUT OF MY ROCK AND HAS SOME MERCY.

RAY IS WITH ME... HIS TIME, TOO, HAS COME.
THE SEA CHANGE HAS OCCURRED; THERE IS NO TURNING BACK FOR US.

RELENTLESSLY THE TIDE BEARS US—SOMETIMES FLOATING, BLOATED DECKS FOR GULLS, SOMETIMES HALF SUNK AND NIBBLED BY FISH—BEARS US TOWARDS THE ISLAND.
WE KNOW THE SURGE OF THE SHINGLE, AND HEAR, WITHOUT EARS, THE RATTLE OF THE STONES.

THE SEA HAD LONG SINCE LICKED THE PLATE CLEAN OF ITS LEAVINGS...
ANGELA, THE "EMMANUELLE" AND JONATHAN ARE GONE.

ONLY WE DROWNED BELONG HERE, FACE UP UNDER THE STONES, SOOTHED BY THE RHYTHM OF TINY WAVES...

...AND THE ABSURD INCOMPREHENSION OF SHEEP.
END

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